

# “THE VIRUS IS REAL:” AFRICAN TRADITIONAL LEADERS’ RESPONSES TO THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

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**Vincent Assanful**

***Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. The world was not prepared, and world leaders were called upon by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to put in place measures to combat and contain the pandemic from spreading and causing havoc on their citizenry. One group of such leaders are the traditional leaders found in all parts of the African continent. This paper discusses the roles played by the traditional leaders in some African countries and how they partnered with national and international bodies to help in the fight against COVID-19. Using mainly archival information, the paper discusses how the traditional leaders responded to the pandemic and the measures they deployed to help the states in Africa fight the pandemic. The advent of the pandemic in Africa changed the lives of the people and the leaders had to put in place measures such as the suspension of certain rituals that bring many people together in a bid to help curb the spread. The paper concludes that if the pandemic has been well managed in Africa and its spread reduced, the roles played by the traditional leaders on the continent cannot be overlooked.*

**Key Words:** Covid-19; Ghana; Virus; Traditional leaders.

## **Introduction**

The novel Coronavirus was first reported on the African continent on February 14, 2020. While the response was slow, the political leadership marshalled all resources both human and material to combat the pandemic. The need to mobilise all human resources in combating the virus was important because of the rate of infections and the number of deaths being recorded. Even though in 2019 the Global Health Index had ranked Africa as ill-prepared to deal with any future pandemics, leading to the prediction that Africa could suffer some 10 million Covid-19 related deaths, these predictions did not come through.<sup>1</sup>

## **Covid-19 in Africa**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2020 the first case of SARS-CoV-2, also known as COVID-19 was reported in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Nigeria was the first Su-

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<sup>1</sup> Agnes Binagwaho and Kedest Mathewos, “What Explains Africa’s Response to Covid-19 Pandemic?” <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-explains-africas-response-to-covid-19-pandemic-> [Accessed April 24, 2021].

<sup>2</sup> Gisele Umvilighozo, et al., “Sub-Saharan Africa Preparedness and Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Perspective of Early Career African Scientist,” *Welcome Open Research* 5 no. 163 (2020), 4.

Saharan country to report a case of the COVID-19 on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, 2020.<sup>3</sup> This led African countries to take steps to avert any widespread of the virus on the continent. On February 22, an emergency meeting was called by Africa CDC with all the Health Ministers of the continent to discuss the pandemic and agree on a continent-wide strategy.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fear and prediction that the virus will ravage Africa and leave a million deaths, that has not happened. As at April 22, 2021, the rate of infection on the continent was 4,488,320 with 119,645 deaths and 4,029,494 recoveries.<sup>5</sup> The low infection rate in Africa has baffled many scientists worldwide who had earlier predicted doom for the continent. The swift response of the continental political leadership has been identified as the main reason for the low infection rates.

The Africa Centre for Disease Control on February 22 called a meeting of all 55 African Health Ministers to an emergency meeting to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and agree on a continent-wide strategy.<sup>6</sup> The main strategy adopted by the continental leaders was to prevent and mitigate community spread so as not to overburden the already stretched healthcare system across the continent.<sup>7</sup> To help in preventing and mitigating community spread, African leaders put in place measures to contain the virus. The use of lockdown and closure of land and air borders as a means of containing the virus were adopted by most African countries. As early as March 15, 2020, most African countries imposed lockdowns and closed their land and air borders. South Africa enforced one of the strictest lockdowns which contributed to the reduction of the infection rate from 42% to 4%.<sup>8</sup>

The President of Ghana also, enforced a three weeks partial lockdown in the Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi areas on March 30 to help curb the spread as the two areas had become the epicentre of the virus. According to the Ghanaian President, the lockdown was to help the country to execute well the 3T (Test, Trace and Treat) agenda of the

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<sup>3</sup> Chikwe Ihekweazu and Emmanuel Agogo, "Africa's Response to Covid-19," *BMC Medicine* 18, no. 151 (2020), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Binagwo and Mathewos, "What explains Africa's Response?," para. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Africa CDC, "Coronavirus disease 2019;" <https://africacdc.org/covid-19> [Accessed April 19, 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Binagwo and Mathewos, "What explains Africa's Response," para. 8

<sup>7</sup> Binagwo and Mathewos, "What explains Africa's Response," para. 9

<sup>8</sup> Binagwo and Mathewos, "What explains Africa's Response," para. 16-17

government in dealing with the virus. The lockdown was again largely meant to enhance the effective contact tracing of individuals who have come into contact with people suspected to have contracted the virus. They were to be tested and where necessary quarantined and isolated for treatment.<sup>9</sup>

Lockdown proved to be an effective means used by governments in Africa to deal with the spread of the virus across the continent. Meo et al in their study on the impact of lockdown on the spread of the virus made this observation:

We found that 15 days after the international lockdown there was no significant decline in the mean prevalence and mean mortality rate due to COVID-19 compared to 15 days before and 15 days during the lockdown in 27 countries. However, daily cases of COVID-19 and growth rates showed declining trends by the end of the 15 days after the lockdown period, leading to a critically important negative growth rate per day by the end of the lockdown period for both new daily cases and deaths. This negative growth rate per day in these two categories (meaning the increase in cases was decelerating) indicated that from a public health perspective, the lockdown had a positive effect on the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from the use of lockdown as a means of confronting the virus, most African countries enforced the mandatory wearing of face masks in public, handwashing with soap under running water and social distancing. Public education was scaled up to help the public cope and deal with the pandemic.

The President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo Addo, was noted to have given regular nation addresses to update his people on the fight against the virus. As of February 28, 2021, the President has addressed the nation 24 times. The President used the address of 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 to inform the nation of the receipt of the first batch of Vaccines from the COVAX initiative. In ensuring that the fight against Covid-19 was fought from all fronts, the governments of

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Danquah and Simone Schotte, "Covid-19 and the Socioeconomic Impact in Africa: The Case of Ghana," *Wider Background Note*, 5 (2020), 2.

<sup>10</sup> S.A. Meo, A.A. Abukhalaf, and A.A., Alomar, et al. "Impact of Lockdown on COVID-19 Prevalence and Mortality during 2020 Pandemic: Observational Analysis of 27 Countries," *European Journal Medical Research* 25, no. 56 (2020), 4.

Africa engaged all persons in the fight. Among those who were engaged were the traditional leaders on the continent. The next section discusses the role played by the traditional leaders to combat the COVID-19 on the continent.

### **Traditional Leadership in Africa**

Before the colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa, the only system of governance known to the people was the traditional system of government. The system of government had at their head Chiefs and female co-rulers. In many African countries, powerful kingdoms and other chiefdoms ruled over the people. Among such kingdoms are, the Zulu of South Africa, Buganda of Uganda, Asante of Ghana, Yoruba of Nigeria just to name a few. Traditional leadership has shown so much resilience that even long after colonial rule, these leaders still play pivotal roles in their communities. The traditional leaders performed several functions in their communities. For example,

- a) They were responsible for the administration of the communities.
- b) They were the military leaders and had the responsibility to protect their citizens.
- c) They were responsible for the law and order. They enacted laws to help keep the peace of their communities.
- d) They were responsible for the religious lives of their people. They were the link between their people and their ancestors.

### **Traditional Leaders as Religious Leaders**

An important feature of traditional leadership in Africa is the sacred nature of the institution. The sacredness of the office ensures that the occupants are regarded as sacred and accorded much respect by the community. Since the office and occupants are considered sacred, their functions are regulated by ritual prohibitions, taboos. Eliade describes the sacred nature of the African traditional leader as:

...an absolute powerhouse of forces simply because he is a king, and one must take certain precautions before approaching him; he must not be directly looked at or touched; nor must he be directly spoken to, and so on. In some areas the ruler must not touch the ground, for

he has enough power in him to destroy it completely; he has to be carried or to walk on carpets all the time.<sup>11</sup>

The religious nature of traditional leaders is seen in their enstoolment rituals. The many rituals that the chiefs go through ensure that their sacred nature is maintained. One such ritual of enstoolment will see the new chief being enstooled dip his feet in a blood of a ram.<sup>12</sup> Blood in enstoolment processes is also seen among the Akan. In the enstoolment rituals of the Assin, an Akan ethnic group in the Central Region of Ghana, a sheep is slaughtered as a sign of blood covenant by the people to signify that a new chief has been enstooled. Blood covenant unites a group of people and its place in an enstoolment ritual shows the resolve of the people to enter into a kind of relationship with the sacred. Blood serves as the symbol of that relationship and reference to it compels the sacred to come to the aid of the community in times of crisis. It is no wonder, among the Akan, that slaughtering of a sheep completes the ritual of removing a chief from office. The blood brings the stool and the sacred into a bond and unites the stool with the sacred.<sup>13</sup>

Among the Akan of Ghana, a chief, the custodian of traditional authority performs such religious roles as customs impose on him. During festival celebrations, he leads his elders to go to the stool room to offer prayers and sacrifice to the ancestral spirits. To appreciate how traditional leadership have shown resilience and been of help in present-day Africa, some historicization of how traditional leadership fared during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods will be important.

### *Traditional Leadership in Pre-colonial Africa*

Before the advent of colonial rule in Sub-Saharan Africa, the main form of governance was traditional governance. These Chiefs and their female co-rulers were in charge of the day-to-day administration of their people. The traditional leaders had absolute powers and were

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<sup>11</sup> Seth Tweneboah, "The Sacred Nature of the Akan Chief and its Implications for Tradition, Modernity and Religious Human Rights in Ghana" (FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2012), 590.

<sup>12</sup> Edem Adotey, "International Chiefs: Chieftaincy, rituals and the reproduction of transborder Ewe ethnic communities on Ghana-Togo Boundary," *Africa* 88, no. 3 (2018): 560-578.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent Assanful, "The Role of Indigenous African Religion in the Practices of the Inheritance and Succession of the Assin" (PhD thesis, University of Cape Coast, 2017), 183.

responsible for the social, economic, religious, judicial and political life of their people. Awinsong describes the traditional leadership during this period thus:

The position of chief was a ritual one in which they served as links between the living and the dead. Chiefs dispensed justice without favour in their role as the representatives of the ancestors. All these enriched the political fabric of the continent.<sup>14</sup>

The roles of the traditional leaders in Africa changed with the introduction of colonization by the European powers.

### *Traditional Leadership in Colonial Africa*

The Berlin conference 1884-1885 was called with the purpose to manage the process of colonization to avoid the outbreak of armed conflict between the rival colonial powers.<sup>15</sup> The various European powers that took over Africa all implemented policies that ensured that the powers of the traditional leaders were altered. Arhin argues that the “colonial government took away the powers of traditional rulers and gave them authority in local government.”<sup>16</sup> The Portuguese were the first to come to the coast of Africa. They landed first in Sierra Leone in 1460. The British and French followed suit in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The imposition of colonial rule saw the eroding of the powers wielded by the traditional leaders. Each of the European colonial powers adopted policies to relate with their colonies.

### *The Portuguese*

The Portuguese operated a political system that saw their colonies as overseas provinces and an integral part of Portugal. The Portuguese operated a system that saw the traditional leaders at the base of their political hierarchy. The Portuguese interfered with the traditional leadership and could remove any traditional leader they were not happy with and replaced them with their stooges.<sup>17</sup> The Portuguese were accused of turning the traditional leaders into decentralised

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<sup>14</sup> Moses Allor Awinsong, “The Colonial and Post-Colonial Transformation of African Chieftaincy: A Historiography.” *Historia* 26, no. 1 (2017): 121–128.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Craven, “Between Law and History: The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and the Logic of Free Trade,” *Review of International Law* 3, no. 1 (2015): 31–59

<sup>16</sup> Kwame Arhin, *Traditional rule in Ghana: Past and present* (Accra: Sedco, 1985), 108.

<sup>17</sup> Nwando Achebe, et al., *History Textbook* (West African Senior School Certificate Examination, 2018), 129; <https://wassechistorytextbook.com>

despots. The Portuguese rewarded native chiefs whom they had appointed as commanders of the auxiliary army as Paramount Chiefs who constituted a scourge for the native population over which they exercise authority.<sup>18</sup>

### *The British*

The British colonial policy was based on assimilation. The policy ensured that Africans were assimilated into the British civilization and culture.<sup>19</sup> The main British administrative policy in their colonies was the indirect rule system. The indirect rule was formulated by Lord Lugard in Nigeria when he bought the North and South of the country together in 1914. The indirect rule policy had an appointed governor, an executive, and a legislative council. Local administration and jurisdiction, however, depended on traditional rulers and traditional institutions.<sup>20</sup> Indirect rule was used by the British to weaken the powers of the traditional leaders. In communities where they had no chiefs, the British appointed and imposed chiefs on these communities. Communities such as the Ibo of Nigeria suffered such fate. The indirect rule made the traditional leaders lose the awe and respect they enjoyed from the subjects. They no longer were the social and political heads of their communities but rather subordinates of the British overlords who used them to implement unpopular measures such as compulsory labour, taxation and military duties.<sup>21</sup>

### *The French*

The French had as their main political policy assimilation which had the intention to “civilize” indigenous Africans and slowly turn them into small French citizens. The main purpose of the policy was to cut down on cost by replacing French manpower.<sup>22</sup> The French, unlike the British, imposed a direct rule on their subjects. The main distinguishing features of the French system included the following:

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<sup>18</sup> Philip Havik, “Direct or Indirect rule? Reconsidering the Roles of Appointed Chiefs and Native Employees in Portuguese West Africa,” *Africana Studia* 15 (2010): 29-36.

<sup>19</sup> Achebe, *et al.*, “History Textbook,” 124.

<sup>20</sup> Swati Chopra, Laura Etheredge and Amy Tikkanen, “British West Africa,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (March 2, 2012); <https://www.britannica.com/place/British-West-Africa>.

<sup>21</sup> Achebe, *et al.*, *History Textbook*, 126.

<sup>22</sup> Achebe, *et al.*, *History Textbook*, 126.

- a) Traditional leaders were not leaders of their people. They were seen as functionaries under the supervision of the French.
- b) The traditional leaders could be transferred from the towns to other towns.

The French system of government saw the destruction of the traditional system of government in their colonies.<sup>23</sup>

### *Traditional leadership in Post-colonial Africa*

The position of traditional leaders did not return to the pre-colonial era even though it was better than during the colonial era. Traditional leaders still have the support of their communities. In many African countries, traditional leaders have been given constitutional rights to operate. In South Africa, traditional leaders cooperated with the national government on levels of governance from the national to the local level.<sup>24</sup> In Ghana, the government of Kwame Nkrumah had a running battle with traditional leaders who were seen to be anti-CPP, the then ruling government. Those who were seen not to be sympathetic towards the CPP were deposed and more favourably disposed towards the CPP were appointed to take their places.<sup>25</sup>

The governments after the CPP were more tolerable towards the traditional leaders. All the constitutions that followed the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966 guaranteed the institution of Chieftaincy which is the bedrock of the traditional leadership. The traditional leaders have become important allies of government and have been called upon by the states in Africa to help in the mass mobilisation of the citizenry. It is in this vein that their help was needed with the advent of the coronavirus.

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<sup>23</sup> Achebe, *et al.*, *History Textbook*, 128; see also Alexander Keese, "Understanding Colonial Chieftaincy from its Final Phase: Responses to the Crisis of an Institution in French-ruled West Africa and Beyond, 1944-1960," *Africana Studia*, 15 (2010), 11-28.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Gansie Mabutla, "The Fate of Traditional Leaders in Post-Apartheid South Africa," <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.519.5562>; see also Dolly Bizana-Tutu, "Traditional Leaders in South Africa: Yesterday, Today And Tomorrow" (Mphil thesis, University of the West Cape, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Rathbone, "Kwame Nkrumah and the Chiefs: The Fate of 'Natural Rulers' under Nationalist Governments," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 10 (2000): 45-63.



## **African Traditional Leaders and the Fight against Covid-19**

There is a strong bond of attachment between traditional leaders and their communities in Africa. Abotche, Awedoba, Odotei, et al in a survey on the perceptions on Chieftaincy found out that most of the community members have strong support for their traditional leaders.<sup>26</sup> Traditional leaders are considered important partners to the modern state as they are seen to be close to their people. Their ability to mobilise their subject is seen in how they are respected and revered by members of their communities. This section cites examples from four African countries namely Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Niger to show how traditional leaders mobilised their communities to help in the fight against COVID-19.

Ghana recorded its first two imported cases in March 2020. The Minister of Health, Kwaku Agyeman Manu stated in a press briefing that the two cases were imported from Turkey and Norway. The Ghana Health Service reports that as of April 25, 2021, Ghana has a total reported case of 92, 513. Out of these cases, 90,151 have recovered or been discharged. 779 deaths have been recorded with 1583 active cases.<sup>27</sup> The Government of Ghana in a bid to reduce the infection rates of the virus put in place many measures. As stated earlier, Ghana adopted the 3T policy of the WHO, testing, tracing and treatment, as a means of dealing with the virus. Besides lockdowns, hand washing and wearing of nose masks, the government of Ghana appealed to all its citizens to join in the fight against the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. It is this call that the traditional leaders in Ghana took up to help mobilise their communities to confront the virus.

The National House of Chiefs (NHoC) in Ghana is the national body responsible for the maintenance and restructuring of the customs and traditions of the traditional communities. The NHoC was established in 1969 under Article 154 of the 1969 Constitution. The Chieftaincy

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<sup>26</sup> C. Abotchie, A. Awedoba, I.K. Odotei, *et al.*, "Perceptions on Chieftaincy," in *Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, Governance and Development*, ed. Irene Odotei and Albert K. Awedoba (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2006), 103.

<sup>27</sup> Ghana Health Service, "Situation Update, Covid-19 Outbreak in Ghana as at 25 April 2021;" <https://www.ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/> [Accessed April 29, 2021].

Act 1971 (Act 370), the Instrument covering the establishment of the House, was enacted on the 17th of September 1971. The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana and the Chieftaincy Act 2008, Act 759 maintained the House. The House performs research, judicial, administrative, financial and advisory functions to all Chiefs in Ghana through the Regional Houses of Chiefs.<sup>28</sup> The NHoC on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020 issued a press statement on the COVID-19 pandemic. I reproduce the press release of the House.

The world was ushered into a new year less than three months ago and little did we expect that the entire world would be hit by such a pandemic. The National House of Chiefs is alarmed about the rate at which the COVID-19 is spreading in the country. Nananom stands in solidarity with the protocols and measures taken by the government to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

The House at its meeting held on Friday, 13th March 2020 supported government efforts in containing the spread of the coronavirus and we encourage every Ghanaian to follow the protocols and measures announced by the government to protect themselves and stop the pandemic.

These measures are in line with guidelines of the World Health Organisation, and many other countries have instituted similar measures which are working to stem the spread of the coronavirus. The House urges all Traditional Authorities to rise to the occasion in support of government efforts in fighting the pandemic. We cannot stand aloof and leave the burden of the fight against the pandemic to the central government alone.

We are the fathers of the Nation; we are closer to the people and our voice is familiar to the people. In line with these, we urge all Traditional Authorities in the country to undertake the following:

- a) All traditional festivals should be suspended with immediate effect. Rites that are associated with traditional festivals and religious days are to be restricted to indoors with fewer numbers. The House knows that these rites are important

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<sup>28</sup> National House of Chiefs, "Overview/profile of the National House of Chiefs," <https://nhoc.gov.gh/about-nhoc/history-of-nhc> [Accessed April 29, 2021].

to our institution, but the times are such that we cannot continue to do things as usual.

- b) All Traditional Authorities are to lead special traditional prayers and rites to purify their communities and seek the face of God'
- c) All Traditional Authorities are to ensure that, social distancing' washing of hands with soap under running, water and robbing of hand with sanitisers are practised by their citizens.
- d) All Traditional Authorities must undertake frequent communal labour in their communities to rid them of filth to avoid possible spread of the coronavirus' This must be done taking into consideration of the protocols on social distancing'
- e) All Traditional Authorities are to ensure that, their citizens do not congregate for any activity in their communities. A Traditional task force must be established by Traditional Authorities to enforce the protocols and measures announced by H.E the President.

Nananom, the situation we are faced with is akin to war and it is our obligation to lead the fight. Let's not disappoint our people. The House also wants to entreat the government going forward to be bold in its consideration of locking down the epicentres of the pandemic if that would cut the spread of the virus. Long live the Chieftaincy Institution, long live Ghana.<sup>29</sup>

The statement from the NHoC is important as it added to the fight against the virus. The statement reiterates that as traditional leaders, it was their responsibility to rise to the occasion in support of government efforts in fighting the pandemic. The traditional leaders said, "we are the fathers of the nation; we are closer to the people and our voice is similar to the people."<sup>30</sup> The traditional leaders issued guidelines for the performance of rituals in the various communities.

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<sup>29</sup> National House of Chiefs, "Statement of the National House of Chiefs on Covid-19;" <https://www.nhoc.gov.gh/event-news/343-statement-of-the-national-house-of-chiefs-on-covid-19> [Accessed April 29, 2020].

<sup>30</sup> National House of Chiefs, "Statement of the National House of Chiefs," para. 4.

Rituals are important in ensuring that traditional leaders can negotiate a responsible relationship in the community with the ancestral spirits and divinities. Rituals have been used by traditional leaders to communicate with the divine to seek the welfare of the community. Because of the importance of rituals to the sustenance of the community, the traditional leaders in Ghana despite asking for the suspension of the rituals that will bring many people together rather asked the leaders to perform the rituals in private. The idea was to both satisfy the sacred and also help prevent the spread of the virus. Rituals in indigenous African religion provide strong linkages between the life of humans and the world of the ancestors. Humans are thus able to maintain constant and symbiotic relations with their ancestors who are understood to be intimately concerned and involved in their descendants' everyday affairs

The WHO has identified mass gatherings as one of the driving forces of the spread of the virus. Being mindful of this directive from the WHO, the NHoC instructed all traditional festivals to be suspended with immediate effect. All rituals associated with the festivals were to be done indoors with few people in attendance. In response to the directives of the NHoC, the Oguaa Traditional Council issued a statement to cancel the 2020 Fetu Afahye, an annual festival celebrated by the people of Cape Coast. The Council in a statement said it decided, because of the measures being taken by the government, to limit the spread of Coronavirus.

In Nigeria, the reaction of the traditional leaders towards the fight against the virus was not different from Ghana. Nigeria recorded its first case of Covid-19 on February 27, 2020. The case count of the virus in Nigeria as of April 29, 2021, was 164,993. 155,021 have been discharged with 7909 active cases. 2,063 deaths had also been recorded.<sup>31</sup> One major challenge that Nigeria faced in its fight against the virus was the misconceptions and misinformation that were peddled by some people. In Plateau State, the WHO has engaged the traditional leaders in grassroots sensitisation of their communities to fight the virus. The Ogomo Pengana of Bassa, HRH Esau Mamman be-moaned the attitude of some of his subjects to the virus. “Covid-19

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<sup>31</sup> NCDC, “Covid-19 Nigeria,” <https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng>. [Accessed April 29, 2021].

does not exist,” “the virus can be cured by eating garlic”, “the temperature of Nigeria will not allow it to thrive” were some of the denials by some members of his community according to the Ogomo Pengana of Bassa.<sup>32</sup> It was this denial that informed the WHO field office in the State to step up the fight against the virus by demystifying the virus through the guidance of traditional leaders who command great respect among their people.

Another traditional leader in Plateau State, HRH Miskom Muduutrie Martin, said all traditional leaders in his domain will utilize mobilization machinery at their disposal such as town announcement, announcements during prayers and meetings as well community-based informants, “to create awareness and strengthen community surveillance not only for COVID-19 but for other priority diseases.”<sup>33</sup> The WHO Plateau Ste Coordinator, Mr. Wadzingi Bassi, summarised the importance of the role played by the traditional leaders in the State in the fight against COVID-19. He said:

The influence that they wield and respect earned from their subjects provide the entry point to reaching the people with key messages on COVID-19 sensitization and creation of awareness on the virus, symptoms, prevention, community testing and information on the location of sample collection centres in the state, especially at this critical stage of community transmission.<sup>34</sup>

In Abuja, the Federal Capital of Nigeria, 7000 traditional leaders were mobilised to help in the fight against Covid-19. With the role out of the vaccination programme by the Federal government, there was the need to engage the traditional leaders to help in sensitizing their community to come out to be vaccinated. A traditional leader in Abuja, Alhaji Idris Musa of the Giwa community recounted a similar role the leaders did during the polio eradication initiative. He states:

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<sup>32</sup> WHO, “Demystifying Covid-19: WHO Supports Plateau State to Engage Traditional Leaders in Grassroots Sensitisation,” <https://www.afro.who.int/fr/node/13041> [Accessed April 29, 2021].

<sup>33</sup> WHO, “Demystifying Covid-19,” para 3.

<sup>34</sup> WHO, “Demystifying Covid-19,” para 6.

What we did during the polio eradication initiative is a testimony of our capacity to mobilize, sensitize and convince our communities in support of any public health interventions in Nigeria.<sup>35</sup>

In Kwara State, the role played by the traditional leaders in sensitizing their communities led to an increase in persons presenting themselves for the COVID-19 test. The WHO State Coordinator, Mr. Mustapha Katibi confirming this said:

Shortly after we sensitised traditional leaders in Kwara State during epidemiological week 46 in 2020, testing increased from zero to 875 by week 52. So far this year, weekly tests have remained higher than 300 samples, thanks to the ongoing sensitization efforts in the communities by the community and religious leaders.<sup>36</sup>

The success story in Sokoto State is also attributable to the role of the traditional leaders. The WHO Coordinator in the State, Dr. Habibu Yahya also confirmed this saying: “Since the engagement of the traditional leadership of Sokoto under the Sultan, our community testing increased from less than 100 as of September 2020 to over 200 in the current month.”<sup>37</sup> The WHO country representative to Nigeria, Dr. Walter Kazadi Mulombo summed up the vital role of traditional leaders in Nigeria in the fight against Covid-19 thus:

As Nigeria introduces the 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.<sup>38</sup>

South Africa became one of the hardest-hit countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. On Thursday, March 5, 2020, South Africa reported its first case of Covid-19. The case count for South Africa as of April 29, 2021, stands at 1,578,450. Recoveries stood at 1,503,611 and deaths at 54,285.<sup>39</sup> The National House of Traditional Leaders (NHTL) is the body set up to represent the interests of traditional leaders in South

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<sup>35</sup> WHO, “Nigeria Rallies over 7000 Traditional Leaders against COVID-19,” [www.afro.who.int/news/nigeria-rallies-7000-traditional-leaders-against-covid-19](http://www.afro.who.int/news/nigeria-rallies-7000-traditional-leaders-against-covid-19) [Accessed April 24, 2021].

<sup>36</sup> WHO, “Nigeria Rallies,” para 8.

<sup>37</sup> WHO, “Nigeria Rallies,” para 9.

<sup>38</sup> WHO, “Nigeria Rallies,” para 11.

<sup>39</sup> “Update of Covid-19;” <https://sacoronavirus.co.za> [Accessed April 29, 2021].

Africa. It was established to represent traditional leadership and their communities; advance the aspirations of the traditional leadership and their communities at the national level; advance the plight of provincial houses of traditional leaders, traditional leadership and their communities at the national government level; participate in international matters that have to do with custom, traditions and matters of common interest and influence government legislative processes at the national level. The mandate of the House is to promote the role of traditional leadership within the constitutional dispensation; promote nation-building; promote peace, stability and cohesiveness of communities; develop, preserve and promote culture and traditions of communities; consider Parliamentary Bills referred to it by the Secretary; participate in intergovernmental structures and advise the national government and make recommendations on any matter that the government may require.<sup>40</sup>

The traditional leaders in South Africa joined the fight with the government to combat the coronavirus pandemic. One major decision taken by the traditional leaders in South Africa was to cancel the initiation season for 2020 when President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a lockdown of the country. The initiation season is a period many young South African males are initiated into adulthood. The suspension according to Poswa “was a response to the fears that the initiation schools would become breeding grounds for infections as there were unavoidable close contacts among the initiates and those assisting with initiation process.”<sup>41</sup> Male initiation rituals in South Africa are important as they are used by the people to make an adult out of the boys. An important aspect of the initiation ritual is the secrecy attached to it. Maintaining secrecy is related to the sacred nature of the practice and is constructed by many as a way of safeguarding the ritual from those who may want to dishonour it.<sup>42</sup> These ceremonies provide structures for instruction in traditional knowledge, but, more

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<sup>40</sup> “National House of Traditional Leaders,” <https://nationalgovernment.co.za/units/view/135/national-house-of-traditional-leaders> [Accessed April 29, 2021].

<sup>41</sup> Xaxi Poswa, “The Role of Traditional Leaders in Combating Covid-19 in Rural Areas,” *Local Government Bulletin* 15, no. 3 (2020), para 3.

<sup>42</sup> Tapiwa Magodyo, Michelle Andipatin and Kyle Jackson, “The Role of Xhosa Traditional Circumcision in Constructing Masculinity,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 47, no. 3 (2017): 344–355.

important, they reintegrate an individual into kin, community, and cosmos when new status is attained.

The first case of coronavirus was announced in Niger on March 19, 2020. The case count as of April 29, 2021, was 5224 with 4847 recoveries and 191 deaths.<sup>43</sup> Traditional leaders in Niger just as their counterparts in other African countries have been mobilised to help the government of Niger fight the coronavirus pandemic. Amirou Albade, the President of the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger, is leading other traditional leaders to sensitise their communities on the virus. Discussing the roles, they play in helping to fight the virus, Amirou Albade said:

We are mobilizing the maximum number of chiefs in the neighbourhoods of Niamey. The message to the population is clear: there is no medicine against the virus, the only way we save lives now is following the preventive measures. These are times for solidarity, not division. Everyone individually and collectively must act to prevent community spread.<sup>44</sup>

With the role out of the Covid-19 vaccination in Niger, the traditional leaders were at the forefront to help dispel any rumour about the vaccines. With the help of UNICEF, the traditional leaders led the campaign against vaccine hesitancy. The Sultan of Zinder, Aboubacar Sanda, said their action was to help dispel the myths by being vaccinated first. He explained further:

We must work together with the government to remove the myth and dispel the conspiracy theories around vaccination. There is so much disinformation peddled by some individuals about this vaccine. We agreed to embark on an awareness campaign to deal with this. Leaders should lead by example in spreading positive information about the COVID-19 vaccine. Religious and traditional actors are well-positioned to respond and communicate information and teachings to their communities in times of crisis.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Worldmeters, "Niger Coronavirus Cases;" <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/niger/> [Accessed April 29, 2021].

<sup>44</sup> Juan Haro and Rosman Gosmane, "Traditional Leaders in Niger: The Virus Is Real," <https://www.unicef.org/wca/stories/traditional-leaders-niger-virus-real> [Accessed April 29, 2021].

<sup>45</sup> Lalaina Fatratra Andriamasinoro, "In Niger, Traditional Leaders Drive Campaign against Vaccine Hesitancy," <https://www.unicef.org/niger/stories/niger-traditional-leaders-drive-campaign-against-vaccine-hesitancy> [Accessed April 29, 2021].



## Conclusion

With the advent of Covid-19 in Africa in March of 2020 African leaders mobilised all their human and material resources to combat the pandemic that has ravaged the whole world. In their attempt to show leadership and prove that they are closer to their people, traditional leaders across all of Africa did not sit by but mobilised forces to join national and international organisations such as the WHO and UNICEF to fight the pandemic. In an Afrobarometer survey, traditional leaders were seen to be among some of the trusted leaders in Ghana.<sup>46</sup> The survey also revealed that traditional leaders were seen to be very influential in Ghana and most are likely to cooperate with the government to get things done.<sup>47</sup>

Trust in national leaders is important if the state should carry the citizens along with any national policy. It is this trust in the traditional leadership of Africa that the traditional leaders leveraged to help in the fight against COVID-19 in Africa. Addressing the National House of Traditional Leaders, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa commended the traditional leaders for their show o leadership and support in the height of the Covid-19 attack on South Africa. He said:

Our traditional leaders were deeply immersed and involved in things such as food distribution and assisting our people as they are facing this great hardship. They also helped with child-friendly masks in eight of our provinces. We want to thank you for your contribution. We saw you at work and with partnerships of this kind we can do more and there's no doubt about that. With partnerships like this, we can do so much more to improve the plight of our people.<sup>48</sup>

As was said by the traditional leaders in Niger that the virus is real and only a concerted effort by state and non-state actors can help deal with the pandemic. It is this leadership that the traditional leaders on

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<sup>46</sup> Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Gidfred Boateng Asiamah, "Trusted and Influential: Religious and Traditional Leaders Can Be Assets in Covid-19 Fight," *Afrobarometer Dispatch* 355 (2020), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Sanny and Asiamah, "Trusted and Influential," 6.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Mosia, "Government working on building strong relationship with traditional leaders: Ramaphosa;" <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/govt-working-on-building-strong-relationship-with-traditional-leaders-ramaphosa/> [Accessed April 30, 2021].

Vincent Assanful

the African continent are offering to help defeat the novel coronavirus pandemic ravaging the continent.

*Vincent Assanful*

vassanful@ucc.edu.gh

Department of Religion and Human Values  
University of Cape Coast