
The Role of the Traditional Rulers in the Fight Against Covid 19 in Ghana

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To cite this article:

Emmanuel Abeku Essel The Role of the Traditional Rulers in the Fight Against Covid 19 in Ghana. *Social Sciences*. Vol. 9, No. 5, 2020, pp. 140-145. doi: 10.11648/j.ss.20200905.11

Received: August 4, 2020; **Accepted:** August 17, 2020; **Published:** August 31, 2020

Abstract: The outbreak of the health pandemic, novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID19) in Ghana brought untold hardship to Ghanaians in the form of loss of jobs increase in prices of certain essential items such as hand sanitizers, nose masks and food in the face of a three week lock down in Accra, the national capital and Kumasi, the regional capital of the Asante region stretched government beyond limits because Kumasi which serves as the neck between the north and south of the country had its economic activity halted. In the heat of this situation the greatly affected people were the vulnerable in society who hardly can make ends meet. However, since shouldering of state responsibilities and assisting the poor in society cannot be the responsibility of the state alone, in instances where push comes to shove, both state and non-state actors all lend a helping hand to the government to help deal with such difficulty situations. One particular non state actor that on a number of occasions have lived up to its calling has been traditional rulers. The fourth republican constitution of Ghana which was promulgated in 1992 recognises traditional rule and gives the actors in charge the powers to perform some non-statutory functions in their areas of jurisdiction to promote the wellbeing of their people. It is in the face of this mandate that the paper examines the role the traditional rulers played in the fight of the outbreak of the COVID 19 in Ghana. The paper uses the content analysis approach to explore the support traditional rulers offered the Ghanaian populace based on news reportage to help ameliorate the suffering of their subjects during the pandemic period by way of giving handouts, providing both cooked and dry foods and sanitary items to the masses to help reduce their burden in the pandemic period. Based on what most of the traditional rulers did, the paper concludes that traditional rulers in Ghana as non-state actors, are a force to reckon with and a solid partner to government in providing the needs of the country.

Keywords: Role, Traditional Rulers, Covid 19, Ghana

1. Introduction

The COVID 19 pandemic constitutes one of the most profound and complex challenges facing development with negative impacts on health as well as social and economic progress. Globally, there are about 17.5 million cases reported with about 677,454 deaths recorded as at 30th July, 2020, while sub-Saharan Africa has been identified as the 'hotbed' of the next wave of the pandemic. This pandemic can be likened to the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) epidemic that hit some countries like Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and was classified by the United Nations as the longest, largest, deadliest, and the most complex and challenging Ebola outbreak in history [31]. What started as a public health crisis in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China and

was reported to the World Health Organization on December 31, 2019 was declared a global health emergency on January 30, 2020. Furtherance to this, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, its first such designation since declaring H1N1 influenza a pandemic in 2009 on March 11, 2020, [32]. The deadly disease's knock-on effects on humanity are huge – loss of lives, stifled growth rates, reversed recent socio-economic gains, aggravated poverty and food insecurity, and destroyed livelihoods, particularly affecting women and children. Coronaviruses fall within the *Cornidovirineae* suborder, family *Coronaviridae*, and subfamily *Orthocoronavirinae* of the order *Nidovirales*. Coronaviruses comprise a large family of viruses within the order *Nidovirales* containing single-stranded positive-sense RNA genomes of 27-32 kilobases [28]. Coronaviruses include a

number of important human and livestock pathogens responsible for a range of diseases. Historically, human coronaviruses OC43 and 229E have been associated with up to 30% of common colds.

The first two case of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) recorded in Ghana were confirmed on 12th March 2020, when two infected people came to Ghana, one from Norway and the other from Turkey [10]. Since then, the total cases recorded is 33,624 as at 15th July, 2020. [29] As an attempt to assuage the pain of the citizens of Ghana and also arrest the eminent economic down turn of the Ghanaian economy, the president on the 11th of March 2020 directed the Minister of Finance to as a matter of urgency, set aside the cedi equivalent of 100 million United States of America Dollars as Ghana's coronavirus readiness and response action. The Health Minister of Ghana Kwaku Agyemang-Manu at a press conference broke the news to the Ghanaian populace and the President followed it up with a statement on measures put in place to avoid the spread of the coronavirus. One of the measures taken was a three-week partial lockdown of Greater Accra, the capital of the country and parts of the greater Kumasi the capital of the Ashanti region [2]. The president in his speech appealed to the well to do in the Ghanaian society to show the Ghanaian hospitality not only to foreigners who due to the disease are not travelling into the country, but rather should show that Ghanaian hospitality and love to their Ghanaian compatriots and desire to be each other's keeper in the midst of the difficulty the disease has unleashed on Ghanaians. He also appealed to both state and non-state actors and corporate organisations to lend a helping hand in the fight against the disease.

One of the oldest institutions that has been part of the Ghanaian governing system has been traditional rule. Though the institution and the personalities involved are well-known and in the past, played a huge role in the nation's earlier governance system, they have become a force to reckon with in recent times and part of the democratic governance space of Ghana. Though in the colonial era traditional rulers were seen by the colonial administration as antagonists to their role, they became a tool employed in the administration of the colonies through the indirect rule system to maintain law and order [17].

Even though it is an institution that is not given the desired recognition at the apex level of the governance space due to restrictions placed on them in the 1992 fourth republican constitution, on the contrary, it is an institution that is well recognised in the constitution and also clothed with the powers as the custodians of the norms and culture of the country, and where it matters, their expertise are tapped in certain quarters of the governance system, because the institution is deeply entrenched in the culture of the people, [25]. Owing to the uniqueness of the institution, those who drew the 1992 Fourth Republican constitution of Ghana being aware of the role traditional rule plays established the independence of the chieftaincy institution and its allied divisions [3]. This was further given a backing through the Chieftaincy Act of 2008, Act 759, which is in agreement with

the 1992 constitution, something which provides for the chieftaincy processes and procedures to guide the institution in its activities as stipulated in the constitution. It is a common knowledge that, in the face of the important role played by traditional rulers in the past and has continued, still makes them a strong partner to government in the development of their areas of authority and the nation at large and when they have dared to assist, they have discharged their duties with distinction. [8] This study therefore aims at the role of the chief in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ghana's fight to curb its spread.

2. The Role of Traditional Leaders and the State

The office of the traditional ruler has progressed right from the beginning of the establishment of politics within the section of what is referred to as modern Ghana. The traditional rule institution is much respected and held in admiration while at the same time it is regarded to be the embodiment of the spirit of the ancestors and a link between them and the living community. Added to that, the institution offers a renewed sense of belonging as well as being a powerful agent of social cohesion and harmony. Chiefs continue to hold a symbolic cultural role in Ghana and have become informal administrators and points of liaison between local communities and state institutions. Chiefs, according to [24] are regarded as the personification of the values, communities and traditions that come under threat as urbanization, modernization and commodification proceed. While chieftaincies are often regarded as archaic institutions and hence must be done away with, there are few signs that their significance is not diminishing and given the needed support and recognition, they will contribute their quota to the nation's development. Further to that, surveys show a strong and tenacious support for traditional authorities and institutions across a number of African countries, including Ghana [5].

Many are of the opinion that chiefs are strong where the state is weak, however with the influx of rural-urban migration the awe surrounding the chiefs' power and prestige has been windswept, [14]. In situations where traditional rule has survived, their position has steadied in unification with the consolidation of the modern state.

Traditional leaders in Ghana remain, for a variety of motives and important to the design and implementation of development projects within their areas of authority. The essential occupations include mobilization of their communities for development purposes. This includes the provision of infrastructure for enhanced standard of living within their community. Sometimes, traditional rulers initiate development projects and secure the support of both internal and external development agents for the execution of these projects [9]. Besides, they are expected to ensure that peace and stability which are essential conditions for development through adjudication of cases, distribution and sale of land

and the management of communal resources such as land, water bodies and forest resources. On the health front, the focus of leadership within health systems to date, has been on leadership in the formal sector with a lack of attention to the role of traditional leadership in the community. [27] Likewise, the role of leadership in health policy implementation primarily focuses on the formal sector, [11]. Although not too large a number of studies recognised the importance of traditional leaders in promoting development and as agents of change, not much empirical studies have been made that analyses fully their role in promoting health [19&12]. The absence of analysis of the role of traditional leaders in promoting health service utilization in published literature is surprising, given the recognition of their role within the community system [19&12]. [22] affirmed that, systematic review on the effectiveness of community participation interventions in maternal and new-born health, argues for the need for better studies, in particular qualitative studies in the area. Traditional leaders play a prominent role at the community level in Ghana [6 &21], exercising governance, power and authority.

There are many examples in Ghana where traditional rulers have used their influence by mobilizing resources to undertake community projects that ensure the well-being of their people. The legitimacy of traditional leaders is based on the concept of “divided legitimacy” in which political legitimacy is divided between the post-colonial state and the traditional rulers. In Ghana where traditional leaders remain in large measure outside the immediate supervision of the state, traditional leaders may use their “differently rooted legitimacy” to advocate for their communities’ development not only with the state, but also with organizations outside the control and boundaries of the state. Traditional rulers constitute an effective part of the social vaccine in the campaign against any pandemic that befalls their subjects.

3. Methodology

The paper relied on the qualitative content analysis research approach, this encompasses the systematic coding of a large capacity of text to identify patterns or themes and meanings from the text [16 & 27]. Content analysis in the words of [16] is a “widely used qualitative research technique”. They were of the opinion that rather than being a single method, current applications of content analysis show three distinct approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. One can conduct three different types of qualitative content analysis—conventional, directed, or summative. Conservatively, qualitative content analysis involves the use of grounded theory (the systematic generation of theory from the analysis of data) to develop codes directly from the text [5 &19]. Equally, it could be said that, qualitative content analysis, begins with a theory or relevant research findings followed by coding and analysis. Finally, summative qualitative content analysis utilizes the counting of words or manifest content and latent meanings

and themes to explore the usage of themes in the text [16].

Owing to the fact that the paper was carried out using spoken words, the summative qualitative content analysis research method was considered most suitable. Summative qualitative content analysis involves a series of interconnected steps—reading, coding, presenting, plummeting, and interpreting the data.[30] The purpose for choosing this methodology was due to the fact that COVID 19 is a novel disease and this was to give the writer space to have a natural setting of looking at the role traditional rulers have played to help assuage the difficulty of their subjects. Not only that, this was adopted so as to enable the writer have a full and detailed information of the specific role the leaders played to help their subjects, something that would be difficult for quantitative data to capture.

After multiple line-by-line reading of the statements by the traditional leaders, the coding process began by classifying the unit of analysis, or basic unit of text, as a code that expressed an idea or individual theme in the text. Since assigning a unit of text to a single code may be challenging, some units of text were assigned to more than one code [19]. The text within and between the codes was analysed to identify central observations, relationships, and patterns in the data [30]. Finally, the data was interpreted to identify overarching lessons learnt.

4. Results

The results relating to the role of traditional rulers in the fight against COVID-19 in Ghana is focused on the following themes: (i) respect for the position of traditional leader by the community; (ii) support from traditional leaders for the fight against the pandemic; (iii) links between the formal health system and the community or traditional structures; and (iv) traditional leaders as enforcers of government policies.

4.1. *Respect for the Position of Traditional Leader*

In any traditional society, the traditional rulers are recognised and given attention as influential personalities, they are seen and accorded respect as first among equals of the community, while some are addressed with the term ‘owner of power’. The powers they will were often referred to as being ‘formal’ and enduring, primarily consisting of the direction of development agendas in the form of making bye-laws for the community to obey and follow. They are also seen as the foundation of wisdom as they let people know what needs to be done to enable development in the village. This encompassed legal issues and health. It was widely believed that chiefs have legitimate authority, because they are chosen by the people and are trusted by government. This accordingly was echoed by the Central Regional Minister, Kwamena Duncan on ATL FM that the chiefs play an important role in curbing the COVID 19 menace in the society as their subjects obey their bye-laws. Nana Kweku Enu III, a Chief of Apewosika, a community in the Cape Coast Metropolis re-echoed this by stating that the

Omanhene of Cape Coast Traditional Area instituted a caveat that anybody who is seen flouting the laws of the land and also the directive that the government had instituted would be dealt with. The offender who puts his/her neighbour in serious jeopardy would be made to do communal labour before being handed over to the security apparatus to be sanctioned. This goes to prove that they have legitimate authority. It is believed that the formal powers of the chief come from the ancestors so if anybody flouts their directives, a calamity might befall that person.

In the fight against the spread of the virus, it was found that, if the chief is skilful and more powerful, his commandments would be obeyed. This was again evident in a news item on the nation's Broadcaster, GTV when Otumfuor Osei Tutu II (the over-lord of the Asante Kingdom) asked his subjects to adhere to the protocols of the pandemic since his land was being infected. This directive was obeyed and the rise of the infections was stabilised. This goes to show that, the chiefs are strong and powerful when it comes to their subjects. When a chief speaks, his subjects listen, so when something comes from the chief the people understand it more than if someone else should say it (Nana Kweku Enu III, 2020). There were frequent references by all news portals categories to the chiefs' devotion to their communities.

4.2. Support from Traditional Leaders for the Fight Against the Pandemic

All statements on the role of the chief in the fight against the pandemic pointed to the pivotal role they are playing in supporting the government. Another act that brought the leadership qualities of the traditional ruler's unique role to the fore in the face of the COVID 19 pandemic was the suspension of the celebration of traditional festivals. These festivals which are mostly celebrated to reminisce an important occasion in the history of the group who celebrate them also serve as a platform where family and friends meet together to make merry, honour departed family members and also settle family disputes. It is worthy to note that aside the economic benefits that accrue to the areas where these festivals are celebrated, the nation has its GDP boosted through tourism by foreigners who come to witness such festivals. For instance in the year 2019 which marked the four hundred (400) years of the abolishment of the slave trade, the government instituted the 'Year of Return' programme which led to the country receiving more than 200,000 travellers, mostly tourists and a revenue of \$1.9 billion dollars into the economy as was reported by the Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Mrs. Barbara Oteng-Gyasi. After a successful roll out of the programme and to sustain it and to boast the country's tourism sector, the government rolled out another programme called 'Beyond the Return', but unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID 19 disease has thrown the programme out of gear.

One of such major festivals which has been suspended in the country is the Oguua Fetu Afahye celebrated by the chiefs and people of Cape Coast. As a precautionary measure against the spread of the pandemic, Nana Kweku Enu III,

chief of Apewosika-Kokoado in the Oguua Traditional Council in an interview with ATL FM News stated on behalf of the Oguua Traditional Council that, Oguua Fetu Afahye for 2020 has been suspended. "Every year we celebrate Oguua Fetu Afahye, but because of the COVID 19 and the President's safety measures, Nananom of Oguua cannot go out to celebrate Oguua Fetu Afahye" [1]

Another major festival in Ghana that also suffered same fate was the 'Abokyer' deer hunting festival celebrated by the people of Effutu or Winneba. In an attempt to protect life and property, the paramount chief of the area and Chairman of the Traditional Council, Neenyi Ghartey VII is quoted by the graphic online that "this year's Aboakyer festival will be put on hold due to the COVID-19, because at this material moment, the Council valued the lives of the people within the traditional area than anything".

The role of the traditional leaders was at play again, this time from the eastern corridor of the country where in an attempt to save life and property in the midst of the COVID 19, the Kwahu Traditional Council on the 16th of March, 2020 issued a directive suspending the celebrations of the Kwahu Easter and other related activities indefinitely in the rouse of the coronavirus outbreak. The circular read in part that "to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 cases in Ghana all appointments and visits to various palaces in Kwahu has been cancelled unless they are extremely necessary". The release as signed by the Registrar of the Traditional Council, Mr Samuel Tuffour further added that, "one week, forty days observations and funerals in Kwahu must be on hold indefinitely".

This directive from the Kwahu Traditional Council one can say had far-reaching consequences on other festive activities in the area. One of such festive programmes which was heavily hit in the face of the effort to reduce the effects of the spread of the COVID 19 was the paragliding festival. The paragliding festival which was instituted by the government in 2005 and has been an annual affair was cancelled by the Ministry of Tourism. [23] The centre of attraction for the festival is the Kwahu ridge and it is a festival that is held usually alongside the Kwahu Easter Festival. With the suspension of the Kwahu Festival by the Traditional Council, and all visits to the traditional area suspended, it sounds to reason that the paragliding festival too be suspended. [7 &20]

4.3. Links Between the Traditional Rulers and the Government

Chiefs are often described as partners in development and economic planning, with the chief representing the primary link between the community, the District Assembly and the Central Government. It was therefore not surprising that when the government, through economic reliefs was giving food items to the vulnerable in the country because of the shutdown of economic activities, the chiefs were also doing their part all in a bid to curb the spread of the pandemic.

As a way of helping the citizenry to have food during the initial problems of the lockdown where certain parts of Greater Accra the capital, Asante and the Central regions

were shut down, some traditional rulers took the initiative by providing food for their subjects. One particular ruler who scored a high mark in this area was the Asantehene, (the overlord of the Asante kingdom). The traditional ruler in helping to alleviate the suffering of his subjects distributed an amassed of food and other essential commodities to the people because of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

The things distributed included bags of rice, cooking oil, canned tomatoes, salt, vegetables, boxes of medicated soaps, sardines, boxes of bottled water, boxes of hand sanitizers, assortment of fruits and others. As a way to also motivate health professionals to give off their best in the face of the challenges in the fight against the disease the overlord added health workers to the vulnerable who were to be supported. To ensure free movement and easy access to the affected, the Asantehene also dedicated some branded vehicles, including a truck, to help in the distribution of the items. Further to that and to give meaning to the president's call for the citizenry to stay home and avoid the spread of the disease, the designation vehicles were specially branded with the inscriptions such as "Stay Home-Stay Alive", "Manhyia Palace Covid-19 Humanitarian". [4&13]

4.4. Provision of PPEs

As the current global pandemic of Covid-19 escalated, the demand for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) had never been greater. The Ghanaian Government was committed to ensuring that those on the frontline in responding to Covid-19 were provided with the critical PPE they needed to do their job safely. Again, seeing it to be wise, the government extended the provision of these essential items to everyone. Seeing the efforts of the government, the traditional leaders also provided some of these PPE's to their subjects. The chiefs, understood the important role that those inside the health care system are playing in the nation's Covid-19 response.

According to the Chiefs, it is their specific accountability to ensure that responsibilities for Health and Safety, including the provision of suitable PPE were effectively assigned, accepted and managed at all levels in the community. In liaison with the District Assemblies, consistent with good practice, the chiefs gave their subjects gloves, medical/surgical face masks - hereafter referred as "medical masks", goggles, face shield, and gowns. The Omanhen of Cape Coast, Osabarima Kwesi Atta II, for instance, in a donation during the onset of the pandemic in the country, said, "the traditional authority in the Cape Coast Metropolis has instructed that a committee be set up to ensure that the virus is prevented in the Area." "Though we don't have any case of the virus in Cape Coast, I have directed that stringent measures be taken to ensure that our people are secured, "we have COVID-19 committee in place, we have been engaging in public enlightenment to educate and inform our people about the virus and the measures they must take to protect themselves and others" (Osabarima Kwesi Atta II). The chief also works as a local gatekeeper between formal institutions of the state and residents of his

area, a role which multiplies as urbanization and state formation spawn additional gatekeeper positions.

5. Conclusion

The root identity of Ghanaian chiefs is that of sovereign community leader. In the literature, the chiefs' main characteristics are their traditional authority over a relatively homogeneous local population and their management of the accompanying land. Chiefs are also described as the personifications and peacekeepers of local tradition, functioning as syncretic kingpins between the traditional and the modern. When a chief nevertheless wants to assert his role as community leader, he now faces competition from a range of specialized organizations. Once enstooled (appointed), the chief is in that position for life, protected by the state and ultimately by the power of other chieftaincies wield across the country and as established in the constitution, the legal-rational authority of the state supports for the chiefs' traditional authority

Most Ghanaians today cannot imagine a community without a chief. The chief is the temperament and concentration of his people. When he gives orders, it is realised as a law. [25] Traditional leadership in Ghana has survived into the modern era and is guaranteed by the modern constitution. Although as an institution it seems to have lost aspects of its power it has modified itself and adapted its functions in order to play a key role in providing the developmental needs of the communities where it operates.

This is done through advocacy, collaboration with donor agencies, central government organs as well as identifying innovative usage for revenue generated within the community. Traditional leadership, when properly exercised, also provides extra security in guaranteeing the fundamental human rights, particularly of the marginalised members of the community. Thus, from the ongoing if the above-named useful model is adopted, appropriately adapted and deployed in the quest for alternative methods for development, will go a long way to enhance the position of traditional rulers.

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