



Traditional Leadership And Covid-19 Coping Strategies In The Rural Areas Of Southeast Nigeria: A Theoretical Exposition

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ABSTRACT

The majority of Nigeria's population resides in rural areas. Reports have shown that socioeconomic inequalities in rural areas were further exacerbated by the government's measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. Traditional leaders were faced with the double challenge of providing leadership to contain the spread of the virus while managing the existing socio-cultural and economic difficulties inherent in their communities. Many studies on the impact of COVID-19 among rural dwellers have been largely empirical, with little or no scholarly works aimed at providing robust theoretical insight into the dynamics of the roles of traditional leadership in managing global pandemics such as COVID-19. This paper aims to provide a theoretical analysis of the roles of traditional leaders in dealing with the impact of COVID-19 on rural communities. Hence, the structural functionalist and social support theories were used as analytical frameworks to explain the strategic place of traditional leadership in providing coping mechanisms for their subjects during the pandemic in southeast Nigeria. It is evident in the literature that the impacts of COVID-19 on rural communities were characterized by myths, misconceptions, poverty, fear, illness, and disruption of communal lifestyles, which may have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of the rural dwellers. Corroborating the basic assumptions of the structural-functionalist and social support theories, it is the submission of this paper that interconnectivity at different levels of governance, social capital from philanthropists'/charity organizations, and traditional medications were mobilized by traditional leaders as coping strategies to mitigate the disruption of socio-cultural, economic lifestyles and general well-being of the rural communities in southeast Nigeria, by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Tradition Leadership, COVID 19, Coping Strategies, Rural Areas, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus, otherwise known as COVID-19 has negatively changed the world since its emergence in China in late 2019 and its eventual speedy widespread worldwide from early 2020 (Zhu et al., 2020). COVID-19 is a global catastrophe with detrimental and adverse effects on all socio-economic fundamental pillars (Banulescu-Bogdan et al., 2020).

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, cases and deaths were concentrated in large urban centers (Cuadros, et al., 2021). However, as the pandemic progressed, rural communities began to bear a higher burden from the virus. In comparison with other natural disasters, various scholars argue that COVID-19 is unique in terms of its predictability and effects on society; moreover, poor households, especially in rural areas, have been adversely affected to a greater extent (Shafi et al., 2020). Rural residents account for 14 percent of the total US population but are 16 percent of all new COVID-19 deaths through February 2021. In that same time period, rural communities have experienced 175 deaths per 100,000

residents, compared with 151 deaths per 100,000 residents for urban communities. Death rates have risen in rural communities most months since March 2020 (Phillipson et al, 2020). Additionally, due to unprecedented measures taken to contain the spread of disease, including isolating people and lockdowns, local communities suffered a high level of tensions related to wage and employment losses, increased expenses and business survival, among others (Qiu et al, 2020; Raimi, 2020). Due to the rapid increase in the number of new cases, the COVID-19 created panic, anxiety, income and expenditure pressures leading to psychological and socioeconomic imbalance (Zhang & Ma, 2020). Besides, isolation, uncertainty and fear of contracting the infection also exacerbated the situation, as most people were worried about being infected (El-Zoghby et al, 2020). Furthermore, rural economies are usually based on self-employment (mostly home-based), microbusinesses, which means they are highly vulnerable due to less cash in hand and low resilience (Ali et al, 2020;). Similarly, Phillipson et al (2000) argue that rural communities are usually less prepared to weather the storm during highly uncertain situations like COVID-19. The literature also indicates that past crises, such as the foot and mouth disease outbreak in the UK; significantly affected rural economies (Scot et al., 2004).

The Global Network Against Food Crises noted that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods, the national budget, the supply chain, and trade would compound the problems of food security and increase the effect of hunger globally (Welsh, 2020). The food production and supply chain, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, suffered a serious crack, caused by economic contraction and diverse cushiony policies geared towards mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Agyei-Holmes et al, 2021). A survey on the impact of COVID-19 on food systems in sub-Saharan Africa revealed significant effects on livelihood, food security, and socio-economic dispositions of both farmers and non-farmers in the region. Kansime et al. (2021) reported a negative implication of COVID-19 on household incomes and food security in two East African countries—Kenya and Uganda. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security may have also been reported in various African nations, including Nigeria.

According to Balogun (2020), the government instituted COVID 19 protocols that affected many rural dwellers in Nigeria in different ways, which include but are not limited to the following. Firstly, social interaction is an essential aspect of rural culture in Nigeria context; is as old as any tradition. Farmers are known to interact and share farm information through social gatherings either within their communities or with other social groups in neighbouring communities and such social gatherings are the pivot points through which agricultural extension agents interact with farmers. The social distancing measure that forbade social gatherings constituted barriers to the social interactions of farmers' groups and the social network of information flow between extension agents and farmers in Nigeria (Balogun, 2020).

Secondly, the closure of public and private sectors in Nigeria closed opportunities for rural farm families to access resources for their productive activities (Balogun, 2020). The lockdown measures, which led to situations where people had to work from home, crippled the extension-farmer social networking relationships as it interrupted the movement of extension agents to farmers' communities during the period such that information needed for agricultural activities was not readily disseminated to the farmers. The lockdown also posed challenges to farmers' access to agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, credit etc. In addition, the interstate movement restrictions disrupted the transportation, distribution and marketing of agricultural produce from the rural areas to urban centres, leading to interruptions in food supply chain, wastages of perishable crops and loss of income for farm families (Wiggins, 2020; World bank, 2020).

Given the narratives of the poor state of the socio-economic environment in which the rural families derive their livelihood and the constraints that undermine their socioeconomic development, the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria further complicated the livelihood challenges of rural farm families, particularly with the containment measures that were put in place by the government (Balogun, 2020). Wiggins (2020) observed that the impact of COVID-19 will not be evenly experienced; while the disease may affect the health of some, the economic resources of some others may be affected in some other households, yet even geographically, the impact will be differently felt, especially for rural families as

they may experience changes in the type of farming systems, the types of crops produced, changes in labour dependence and purchased inputs as well as supply chain channels that connect rural families to markets.

The governance in the rural areas in Nigeria is shouldered by traditional leadership. Traditional leaders were faced with the double challenge of providing leadership to contain the spread of the virus while managing the existing socio-cultural and economic difficulties inherent in their communities. Many studies on the impact of COVID-19 among rural dwellers have been largely empirical, with little or no scholarly works aimed at providing robust theoretical insight into the dynamics of the roles of traditional leadership in managing global pandemics such as COVID-19. This paper aims to provide a theoretical analysis of the roles of traditional leaders in dealing with the impact of COVID-19 on rural communities in southeast Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted structural functionalist and social support theories to explain the traditional ruler's role in using the indigenous solution to tackle challenges such as COVID 19 in their various communities.

Structural functionalism

According to Wikipedia (2021), "Structural functionalism, or simply functionalism, is "a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability". This theory views society through a macro-level adjustment based on social structure and social functions that work in harmony to shape the whole society. Structural functionalism centered on explaining and maintaining order, stability and cohesion based on interdependency, socialization and systemic change.

Some sociologist such as Herbert S, August C. and Robert M. sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. It asserts that our lives are guided by social structures, which are relatively stable patterns of social behavior. Social structures give shape to our lives - for example, in families, the community, and through religious organizations. Modern political philosophers use the structural functionalist theory of ancient anthropologist, psychologist and sociologist like, Spencer (1899), Durkheim (1916), Radcliff-Brown (1935), Malinowski (1922), Parson, T (1939) Merton (1949). Political scientist introduced structural functionalist theory in political science and public administration by comparing and analyzing political system. From their point of view, it was discovered that social function and organic life must work together through a network of connection into an integrated whole. Offiong (1997) postulated that "structural functionalism has been generally agreed to be an offshoot from the general system theory. It simply explains what political structures perform, what basic functions the political system and under what conditions in any given system".

Chilcott (1998) posited that structural functionalism conceptualizes society as a system of interacting parts that promote stability or transformation through their interactions" It is however pertinent to look at the system's structures to substantiate particular activities and their interrelations. The basic concept of structural functionalism theory includes:

- (i) Society consists of both structures and functions that are interconnected and interdependent; and ultimately focused on maintaining or mediating society equilibrium (Radcliffe-Brown, (1935) and or necessary transformation (Potts, et al, 2014).
- (ii) Social systems consist of structures and functions necessary for the ongoing health or survival of that system Chilcott (1998).
- (iii) Structures exist to meet the functional needs of a system Merton (1949)
- (iv) Systemic functionality (that is how parts of the system work) across and within structures reinforces and maintains system's structures in the context of an ever-changing complex and unpredictable system.

From the above analysis on structural functionalism it is evident that this study can effectively be anchored on structural functionalist theory. According to Chinnah and Amabibi (2019) there must be cordial interaction, interconnection and interdependence of all the structures and functions for optimal

benefit of the entire society or nation. For a nation to function effectively and efficiently all the structures must perform their respective statutory duties harmoniously to achieve optimally. In fighting against COVID-19, the non-governmental organization, Government Agency, WHO, public and private sectors must work together for the success to be achieved. Traditional ruler in the other hand must provide all necessary measure which the community members would adhere on. The role of the traditional leaders in the community is cardinal as one of the parts that contribute significantly in achieving societal goals. Coherence and harmony were needed among the relevant stakeholders including traditional rulers for optimal maximization and achievement of set goals to fight COVID 19. Government at all levels with her agencies, ministries, departments and private organizations worked concertedly with traditional rulers to achieve the fight against this pandemic in Nigeria rural communities.

Social Support Theory

The term "social support" often appears in discussions of relationships. Social support means having friends and other people, including family, to turn to in times of need or crisis to give you a broader focus and positive self-image. Social support enhances the quality of life and provides a buffer against adverse life events. It is also consistent with a large literature on subjective well-being, which defines well-being in terms of pleasant affect, life satisfaction, and satisfaction within specific life domains (e.g., work, family), having social and personal resources for making progress toward valued goals (Diener *et al.*, 1999), and the fulfillment of basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness that promote intrinsic motivation and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relationship partners can provide this function by accepting a close other's dependency needs (Feeney, 2007), provide a comfortable environment for the expression of negative emotion (Spiegel & Kimerling, 2001), providing emotional comfort and reassurance, conveying understanding and acceptance, providing instrumental aid with regard to alleviating the adverse circumstances, and shielding or defending the close other from negative forces related to the stressor.

Relating social support theory to COVID 19 coping strategies in the rural communities, traditional rural played important role by mobilising local resources such as instructing town criers to announce to the community members on the need to adhere to WHO directives. However, Nigeria government, Nongovernmental organization and churches provided social support in form of palliatives, facemask, sanitisers and other valuables which was administered in the rural areas through the instrumentalities of traditional rulers. Families and friends also provided support to their poor relatives to ensure that everybody survived the immediate challenges of COVID 19 together. The organized traditional leadership that exists in the rural communities was maximized in mobilising local resources, distributing and monitoring activities during COVID 19 lockdown. The coordinated social support from traditional leadership provided the rural dwellers a safe and inclusive space to cope with COVID 19 challenges.

DISCUSSION

It has evidently established in literature that the spillover impact of Covid-19 on the health and socio-economic wellbeing of the people around the world has continued to deepen socio-economic difficulties especially among the vulnerable rural dwellers. Drawing from the theoretical framework of traditional governance, the traditional leadership provided the context based leadership in the rural areas of southeast Nigeria to support their subjects during COVID 19 lockdown. The authority and power they possess validated their relevancy in fighting against emergency situations such as COVID-19 in their various communities. This is consistent with the tenet of structural functionalism theory. The federal government, state government and local government along with Non-Governmental organization and health institutions worked together based on each other's capacities using traditional leaders as sustainable platform in reaching rural dwellers to cushion the effects of COVID 19 in their communities. The interconnectivity and interdependency between government at all levels and traditional leadership provided the re-enforced energy to support the rural poor with preventive information and commodities as well as palliative materials during the COVID 19 lockdown. Traditional rulers encourage their subjects to

desists from hugging each in a ceremonial event such as traditional marriage, burial ceremonies etc. They encourage their subjects to always put on face mask, and wash their hands constantly and never have a handshake with their relatives without wearing hand gloves.

This is a demonstration of the functional relevance of traditional leadership in solving community's problem using indigenous mechanisms. Also, there was sense of order and definition of role in combating the challenges that COVID 19 threw on the communities. The COVID 19 protocol established by the federal state and local government were enforced in different rural communities through the activities of traditional leaders. This would have been difficult if the traditional structure was not functional.

Furthermore, it is well established that the ingenuity of traditional leaders to mobilize social support from the existing sub-micro entities within the communities provided the desired coping strategies for the vulnerable rural dwellers. The rich essence of social capital was utilized by the traditional leadership in cushioning the negative effects of COVID 19. The local resources from religious association, philanthropists, age grade and women association are sustainable social support that our fore-fathers used in solving their communal problems. However, these resources have been relegated to the background amidst the effects of globalization. COVID 19 has brought out the aged long relevance of the resources in solving local problems. Hence, these resources need to be mobilized, strengthened and preserved as well as used in designing developmental interventions in the rural communities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study presented the protective role of traditional rulers in COVID-19 coping strategies in rural areas. COVID-19 being a global pandemic, Nigeria government considers lockdown as an appropriate measure to restrict the deadly virus from affected multitude of people especially the rural poor in Nigeria. The functional roles of traditional leadership came to play and demonstrated its relevance as captured in the theoretical underpin of structural functionalism and social support theories in solving global challenges using local strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for traditional leadership to deliberately not spontaneously mobilize and strengthen their local resources inherent within communities in solving their immediate needs. The government need to be proactive and think outside the box by setting in motion local mechanism that is sustainable in its preparedness against future pandemic to safeguard the rural dwellers.

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