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EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON THE CONDUCT OF AN 'ON-GOING' ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WUPA RIVER IN THE FCT, ABUJA, NIGERIA

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Abstract
One area that has continued to experience the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the academic community. In particular, teaching and research activities have been halted, modified, shifted, or moved from physical to virtual platforms to cope with the effect of the pandemic. This paper examines how the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic is reshaping the conduct of ongoing ethnographic research in the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja, Nigeria. Traditional ethnography entails living with the people being studied, learning their language, or using an interpreter/gatekeeper, participating in their daily activities while studying and observing them. Modern ethnography has accommodated lots of changes as ethnographers do not just study indigenous cultures alone, but also cultures in modern societies, groups, institutions, cities among others. The major challenge faced by researchers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is the inability to continue with the application of the pre-COVID-19 research design such as participant observation and interacting with the participants physically as earlier conceived. Other issues are an elongation of the time-frame for data collection, limited access to study participants, disruptions of segments of the research, inability to acquire adequate information as a result of global and national lockdowns, modifications in the method of instrument administration, fear of contracting the virus, and so on. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for flexibility in the application of research designs to accommodate unforeseen circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic.
Keywords: COVID-19, communities, ethnography, pandemic, riverine, traditional

Introduction
The global pandemic that erupted from Wuhan China in December 2019 has shown its potential capacities in reshaping and influencing virtually everything across human societies. Thus, societies and professionals from different fields are confronted with managing the reality of the new normal (Gomstyn, 2009; Dymond, 2012; Gorifith, 2020; Lee, 2020). One sphere of human activity that has not escaped the rampaging effect of the COVID-19 is academia. Most university calendars and activities such as conferences, workshops, classes, training, travels, competitions, and particularly scheduled time-bound researches have all either being altered, canceled, or modified. These unplanned impacts on academic activities seem to be more profound among the Third World or Global South and the reasons behind it are not farfetched. For instance, there are little or no internet-based infrastructural facilities to enable a swift shift to internet-mediated platforms for teaching, learning, and research. If these modern

technologies and facilities existed, they would have cushioned the nature and extent of the disruptive impact of the pandemic on the routine activities of the academic systems like the universities and other similar academic communities (Onyima, 2020). Again, apart from these issues, Ugwu, (2017); Yacob-Haliso, (2018) and Onyima, (2019) have stressed the need for malleability and flexibility in research ethics and design due to some intersecting issues that may crop up during fieldwork like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now to the specifics, one sphere of the numerous global academic activities hit by the pandemic is 'on-going funded time-bound researches' like this on-going ethnographic research being conducted among selected communities living around the Wupa River in the FCT Abuja, Nigeria. It is pertinent to highlight that, ethnography originated from anthropology and was adopted by other disciplines like sociology, psychology, public health, among so many others. It is a qualitative research approach that is used to study small societies' attitudes, social relations, and activities, requiring participation and observation over a very long period, and to analyze the collected data (Naidoo, 2012; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Reeves, Kuper and Hodges, 2008). Sometimes, in April 2019, the academic supervisor (second author) of the first author co-secured a grant with a principal investigator from Rhodes University in South Africa. This grant is managed by the International Science Council (ISC) and the Network of African Scientists (NASAC) which among other demands required the inclusion and sponsorship of a masters' degree student as a research assistant and in return fees, fieldwork, analysis, and printing the thesis would be paid. The first author was to serve as a research assistant in the general study known as the Leading Integrated Research Agenda for Africa (LIRA 2030) on a project titled *'enhancing urban rivers and wetlands ecosystem health in selected African cities'*. This fieldwork commenced in 2019 but was disrupted in February 2020 due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent declaration of series of national, regional, and state lockdowns in Nigeria. The main purpose of this paper is therefore to review how the ravaging global pandemic impacted this study and review what traditional ethnography was all about. Secondly, discuss modern or contemporary ethnography and finally examine the impact of the COVID-19 on the authors' ongoing ethnographic research in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja Nigeria.

Traditional Ethnography

The word ethnography is derived from two Greek words "*Ethnos*" and "*Graphe*" which means "folks (people/group)" and "written representation/account" respectively. Following the above, ethnography implies the 'writing of report regarding culture in a manner that tells or gives information about that culture' (Rashid, Caine & Goez, 2015:2). It is the writing, study, science or detailed account about the culture of a group. The above definition is the traditional meaning of ethnography. Scholars have traced the history of ethnography to the late 19th century and early 20th century. The ethnographic methodology is of an anthropological origin (Naidoo, 2015:1). This implies that traditionally, ethnography was mainly used in the discipline of anthropology to inquire about new knowledge about a given people and their cultures. Long before ethnographic methodology was born, people, to gather information about a given culture, do not interact with the culture involved directly. Instead, they rely heavily upon and get their information about the culture from government archives, explorers, antiquarians, statisticians, regional offices, missionaries, merchants, travelers, and traders. In this regard, they may be described as documentary agent

researchers, or at most ethnologists (comparative analysts of ethnographic data- a kind of second-hand researchers). Ethnographers, on the other hand, gather data directly from the community they plan to study and also interact deeply with target individuals and communities to obtain insiders' (emic) cultural knowledge (Ugwu, 2017; Gobo, 2011). These methods of collecting information about a culture they research are imbibed by early ethnographers because they have the mentality that the individuals under research are 'primitive' and they will not be able to provide reliable information that will increase awareness about their culture (Gobo, 2011:17). Ethnography was again related, in its earliest form, to the writings of travelers like Herodotus and Tacitus among so many others. These travelers spent brief periods in different locations and before writing about them, they studied the people living in them and their cultures. The Egyptians, Scythians, and Germanic tribes were written about by these travelers and explorers (Robben and Sluka, 2015). However, during the Renaissance, the wake of science and humanism advocated a more scientific analysis of non-Western cultures, a view predated by the historian Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century. The comparison of peoples and cultures called for uniform classifications and correct methods of study to be academically represented. For ethnography, the manual on data collection by the French philosopher Joseph-Marie Degérando, published in 1800, was transformative. It served as the basis for the French Ethnological Society's 1840 manual and the 1841 Notes and Questions on Anthropology, which required several editions for generations of British anthropologists to read (Sluka & Robben, 2015).

Ethnographers such as Spencer, Morgan, Frazer, and Tylor wrote on data classification according to evolutionary standards in the mid-nineteenth-century. For example, in 1985, Lewis Morgan explained phases of cultural/social evolution in his book Ancient Society by liking human societies in terms of government, wealth, family types, language, religion, house life, architecture, and household. A systematic data collection that distinguished their scientific reporting from contemporary travel accounts directed the socio-cultural evolutionists. Detailed ethnography, in general, describes and contrasts various aspects of different cultures in depth. Groups, forms, taxonomies, and divisions provide the cultural dimensions compared to comprehensive ethnography. Detailed ethnography changed in a major way in the late 19th century, when the means of qualitative data collection, ethnographic data compilation, and the theory of cultural evolution were challenged. Because of the expedition of Alfred Haddon to the Torres Straits islands, these methods were challenged and resulted in modifications. Again, in the archipelago, a team of scientists from different fields of study performed first-hand observational studies. Their work in the Archipelago rejected cross-cultural speculative comparisons, and collected local classifications in the native language, although they hardly engage in the day-to-day activities of the individuals examined in their research.

Haddon introduced the idea of fieldwork into anthropology, according to Stocking (1996), and advocated for the cooperation of armchair anthropologists with anthropologists who carry out fieldwork in the ethnographic process. Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski, who were later crowned founding fathers of ethnography, further represent this modern trend at the beginning of the 20th century through their "epistemological analyses of the evolutionism and ethnographic methods of anthropology, respectively" (Sluka & Robben, 2015:178). Some of them, the founding fathers of ethnography, earned the criticism of these scholars as previously mentioned, leading them to carry out more scientific ethnographic research. In one of his studies of the study of the inhabitants of the "Trobriand Islands of the Melanesian Archipelago

in New Guinea" (Gobo, 2011:18), an Englishman from Poland known as Bronislaw K. Malinowski (1884-1942) was the first person to be acknowledged in history to have done adequate ethnographic research. In his research, for two years, Malinowski lived among people; he studied their language and joined them in other people's day-to-day activities to thoroughly study their culture. To get first-hand knowledge from the viewpoint of the indigenous people of the community he researched, Malinowski carried out his research in this manner. This study had a significant influence on the growth of ethnography, and he was also seen as the father of ethnography. Ethnography in its simplest form is, from the above, the development of first-hand knowledge of a given group of people by living among them, establishing relationships, and interviews. It is the systematic investigation into the ways of life of a people. However, in recent times, ethnography has been characterized by several scholars from different perspectives. For example, in Almagor and Skinner (2013:2), "Traditional ethnography is the" formal definition of foreign people, their habits, and customs. This means finding a community that you want to research, such as studying the original indigenous peoples of the riverine groups of Wupa, Jabi, and Gwagwalada in the FCT Abuja Nigeria. And some procedures should be followed for this study to be ethnographic and otherwise for the researcher to obtain sufficient and quality information from the participants, such as living among them for a particular period, engaging them in their everyday activities while studying their language. Ethnography was also described by Naidoo (2012:1) as the "analysis of small societies' actions, involving participation and observation over some time, and the interpretation of the collected data." Ethnography usually requires research by living among them, observing them, and engaging in their day-to-day activities of a certain person, their community, and ways of life to gain information about their culture and develop knowledge. In recent times, however, ethnography has changed as it may or may not involve the ethnographer living for a long time among the community under study, unlike the time of Malinowski and other earlier ethnographers.

Modern Ethnography

Ethnography is subject to change and has developed over time, like every other discipline in the social sciences and humanities. Today, ethnography has taken many forms and shapes and is no longer used alone in the area of anthropology but has been integrated into other fields of research such as sociology, psychology, business / public administration of medicine, political science, and even economics. This implies that the trends of ethnography will change as the ethnographic methodology is adopted by different fields of research since scholars see it from different viewpoints and want to follow the methodology in the way it fits their fields to achieve an objective result (Gobo 2011:16).

 However, rather than the conventional pattern of ethnographic methodology, different types of ethnography have been described and carried out in different fields and as such in the field of education, one can conduct a study on the ethnography of the classroom, marketplace, ballroom, drinking bar, etc. In the management sciences, researchers can conduct an ethnography of a shopping mall, street hawking, etc. In contemporary times, there are different types of ethnography, including but not limited to focus ethnography, critical ethnography, and institutional ethnography (Rashid, Caine & Goez, 2015:3). In this paper, these will be discussed briefly below.

    Focus ethnography is an in-depth study of the lives of individuals that are "extremely fractured and differentiated socially and culturally" (Knoblauch, 2005:1). Thus, it is the study of a more confined, predetermined group's shared experiences

is more like a phenomenological study. This means that focused ethnography is better suited for analyzing interactions in unique environments within a community or subculture (Cruz and Higginbottom 2013:134). Focus ethnography can be adopted or used by researchers who are interested to study a specific collection or group of people in a given culture. Individuals such as offenders, drug abusers, branded individuals, etc. know how they feel and analyze their forms of life in others. Researchers rely on the main attributes of the technique in using focus ethnography, which is' intensive data collection and data analysis procedure, less time spent in the field, occasional observation of participants and the use of technologically advanced equipment (Rashid, Caine & Goez, 2015:9).

Critical ethnography is a way to apply a subversive world-view to the traditional logic of cultural inquiry, according to Rashid, Caine, and Goez (2015:9). It provides, in essence, a straighter forward way of thinking about the links between information, culture and political action" (Thomas, 1993:7). To decide "what might be in a given society or political organized society" (Thomas, 1993:7). According to Madison (2012), this topic is embedded with political intent, knowing social issues (how deep they have eaten into society), and the potential ways of eradicating power imbalances in a specific community. It is important to note that critical ethnographers work as advocates for their participants in carrying out their study. They act as a voice that might motivate the individuals they are studying to bring change. This thus affects their observations and makes many researchers see this ethnographic trend as subjective. Nevertheless, critical ethnographers assume that the word reflexivity refers to the "dynamic and reciprocal effect of ethnographers and study fields on each other" (Muecke, 1994:194).

Institutional ethnography is a form of ethnography that focuses on the interrelationship between individuals and their institutions in a given society. According to Walby (2013:141), institutional ethnography "investigates how the work performed with texts in organizations coordinates daily interactions." Institutional ethnographers concentrate more on the structures and the perspectives that individuals gain from them than on individuals. How does this occur as it does? Guiding questions that are of concern to an institutional ethnographer are' How do these relationships get organized? "(Campbell and Gregor, 2002:7). Institutional ethnography is a type of ethnography that focuses on a given society's interrelationship between people and their institutions. Institutional ethnography "investigates how the work done with texts in institutions coordinates everyday experiences," according to Walby (2013:141). Institutional ethnographers focus more on the frameworks and perspectives that individuals benefit from them than on individuals. Institutional ethnographers concentrate more on the systems and perspectives that individuals gain from them than on individuals. How does this happen the way it does? How do these relationships get organized? Guiding questions that are of interest to an institutional ethnographer are' (Gregor and Campbell, 2002:7). In short, there are many forms of ethnography, and these forms are used in different fields and are carried out using distinct practices in different ways. Researchers no longer need to reside in the field of study for too long, participate in all daily activities and even learn the observed language; unlike the traditional ethnographic pattern (many researchers call in interpreters). Again, it should be noted that the pattern they like and the one that fits their research or field of study are used by different ethnographers.

Effects of COVID 19 on the conduct of the On-going Ethnographic Research on Acculturation, Risks, and Ecosystem Services

For the research assistant's thesis project, the study area includes selected communities living around the Wupa River in the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria; Abuja. Abuja became the capital of Nigeria after the capital of the country was moved from Lagos. Abuja houses the presidential villa (Aso rock), national houses of assembly, and other important federal government ministries, departments, and agencies. Abuja also hosts the Zuma rock which is an important monolith and also a tourist attraction to the nation. Abuja comprises six area councils and these are Kwali, Bwari, Kuje, Gwagwalada, Abaji, and Abuja Municipal. The communities in which this study focused on are the Agwan-Tailor, kpai-kpai, and others, living around Wupa River. This study aimed to explore the nature of the acculturation taking place due to ever-expanding urban realities, and also ascertain the diverse risks and ecosystem services among riverine communities of Wupa River. The study kicked off in the year 2019 and is still in progress to date. The methods adopted by this study are participant observation and In-depth/face-to-face interviews. Participants of the study were those that were carefully observed to make use of the river resources under study and those who have the knowledge and experience about the traditional and current usage of the river under study. These persons include the chiefs of the selected communities living around the Wupa River, car washers who make use of the rivers, sand excavators, *fufu (processed cassava)* fermentation companies, bathers, swimmers, etc. Most data needed for the study have been collected. But with the outbreak of COVID-19, the authors switched to the use of internet-mediated platforms for data verifications through phone calls, WhatsApp, and Zoom with the study participants from communities living around the Wupa River. The progress of the study was also greatly affected by the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. This study was supposed to last for two years (2019-2020) but with the outbreak of the pandemic, the ISC and NASAC have already adjusted the time-frame to accommodate the realities of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic. On our part, many activities were modified or put to a stop which has also prolonged the study period. For instance, as a result of the mandatory lockdown placed on states and inter-state movements as well as the need to adhere to all health precautionary measures such as the use of nose masks, social and physical distancing guidelines, and the fear of uncertainties, there became a need to re-strategize. As a result, one implication of this is an increase in the cost of carrying out the research and the inability to verify data on a face to face basis. Furthermore, the supervision of this study became tough as those concerned were unable to meet and liaise properly for corrections and improvements. This was mitigated with the switch to the use of 'zoom' and other internet-mediated platforms for interaction. In addition to the above challenges, various other issues have been identified as confronting the researches just like ours as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19. These include a longer period of research time, no more face to face interaction where IDI or FGD are required or direct observation, and the switching of face to face interaction to internet-based interaction.

Longer Time of Research

Being a time-bound sponsored research, it was imperative to adhere to the stipulated timelines for each section of the research but with the outbreak of the pandemic, this was not feasible and the funders were contacted. They proactively also had adjusted to the rampaging reality. This study is supposed to last for two years (2019-2020) but with the outbreak of the pandemic, many activities were put to a stop which has also

prolonged the study period. For instance, as a result of national and regional lockdown which lasted to close to 5 months, the period of the research was greatly extended. This kind of modification has been noted by other authors as they asserted that, the research time may extend, the population of the study may change as people may change location, seasons may change or some participants may even die as or move (Fine & Abramson, 2020). Furthermore, with the delay and extension in time of the research, authors may end up waiting more or revisiting the sites for a longer period than earlier planned, since physical space differs from social space (Burawoy, 2003). This extension in time of research forms a major challenge.

No More Face-to-face interaction/Observation

Face-to-face interaction remains one of the fulcra of ethnographic studies but this cannot be conducted in the current research work anymore during the Covid-19 pandemic until the pandemic ameliorates. For instance, as the result of the mandatory lockdown placed on states as well as precautionary [health] measures such as the use of nose masks, social distancing, etc. put in place and fear of uncertainties, participants and researchers were unable to meet for In-depth interviews and Focused Group Discussions. Again, since many of the activities of the study population were halted, direct observation of their day-to-day activities was no longer possible during the lockdowns. This is because the people have to adopt a new pattern of doing things (increased use of an internet-mediated platform like zoom, WhatsApp Interviews, phone call conversations for confirmation of data and long-distance discussion with the researcher which is not face-to-face), that were not there from inception. This is a big challenge because ethnography deals with intimacy when participants are being engaged in IDI or FDG (Fine & Abramson, 2020). This implies that one key aspect of the ethnographic study has been impaired.

Switch to Internet-Based Platforms Data Verification

Since most of the data have been collected before the outbreak of the virus, data verification was done through phone calls, WhatsApp interaction, and Zoom platforms. As a result, there is an increase in the cost of carrying out the research and the inability to verify data on a face-to-face basis. Furthermore, the supervision of this study became tough as those concerned were unable to meet and liaise properly for corrections and improvements. This led to some of the research innovations observed earlier, for instance, the general study required the conduct of physical workshops with relevant institutions, administration of physical survey questionnaire, research team reflections but we did an online workshop via zoom, used Google forms for the administration of questionnaire (had low response rate as target population's contact addresses could not be gotten), team reflection for the online workshop is yet to be done.

Modification in the method of research instrument administration:

A part of the bigger research was the conduct of a series of knowledge co-production workshops and physical research team reflection sessions. All these were shoved and later after series of zoom meetings were moved online. Most study participants were contacted to switch into online data collection modes. Some of the participants obliged while some others were reluctant until they were promised that their data usage would be subsidized. This subsidization of data costs for study participants increased costs and led to unplanned expenditure which was not captured in the pre-COVID-19 research

design. The bigger research which is transdisciplinary research required the administration of questionnaires at some point could no longer be physical 'self or other administered' rather Google forms came to the rescue. Despite this resort to internet-mediated administration of the questionnaires, the response rate was low. One main reason for this low response was because the questionnaire was designed for a targeted group of professionals in the regulatory and management of the wetland and rivers sector and not for the general population. However, not all of them could be reached as most of these professionals are yet to adopt the new normal of internet usage such as the '*zoomification* of almost every human interaction'.

Conclusion

So far, we have explained the trajectory of ethnography from its earliest traditional form to its contemporary form of practice and how the outbreak of COVID-19 has reshaped our on-going ethnographic research. In essence, we argued that with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, ethnographic research like all other research approaches may no longer be conducted in its traditional format or how it used to be. Corona Virus is a deadly virus that was traced to begin from the Wuhan city of China in 2019. The virus kills if those affected are not properly taken care of on time or if their immune system is very weak. In the year 2020, the virus spread to almost all the countries of the world killing thousands of people and affecting millions around the globe. As a result of the rise in fatalities caused by the virus in almost all the nations of the world, it was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. Many actions/guides were put in place by medical professionals and the government to curb the spread of the virus. These include social distancing, the use of nose mask/shield, regular use of hand sanitizers, and in extreme cases self-isolation and compulsory lockdown that was carried out by national security agents. Traditionally as earlier stated, ethnography involves various processes of collecting first-hand information about a group or groups of people using face-to-face interaction, creating rapport, living among the people been studied, and engaging in their social activities. Other techniques include a face-to-face interview, focused group discussion, and many more. Over the years, the field of ethnographic has changed and so has the traditional pattern.

Modern ethnographic research no longer relies basically on living among the group been studied for a long period. Modern ethnographic study now also goes beyond the discipline of Anthropology and has been adopted into various fields of study such as medicine, psychology, sociology, and political science. The modern ethnographic study does not only apply when studying unknown cultures or people whose culture is hidden but also can be applied to institutions and various sub-cultures (departments) in it (Rashid, Caine & Goez, 2015). From the foregoing, ethnography does not take the traditional pattern of just living among a group of people, living among them, partaking in their day-to-day activities in other to get adequate knowledge about them. Again with the development of computer and electronic technology, the field of ethnography has been made easy as interviews and discussion can be done using various devices and internet platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype, and telephone calls. Hence the advent of digital ethnography, social media ethnography, multimodal ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012; Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2013; Mattern, 2018; Abidin, 2020; Proctor, 2020) and comes with its inadequacies like three lies of digital ethnography as noted by De Seta, (2020). Ethnography in recent times has also been categorized as each takes different forms and is used by various scholars and disciplines for the acquisition of first-hand knowledge (Rashid, Caine & Goez, 2015). Modern ethnography however has therefore taken a different direction in

ethnographers no longer need to reside with the participants for a very long period to acquire information necessary for understanding the culture under study. Instead, participants who know the people been studied especially indigenes (insiders) help ethnographers to achieve their goals. Furthermore, technological advancements have also changed traditional ethnography as researchers can be far away and still acquire information from participants through the internet (Dziuban *et al.*, 2018).

However, in the event of a pandemic such as COVID-19, many things were halted and almost all sectors of human life are heavily affected. Ethnographic research which is not excluded from human societal activities is also affected in many ways. Ethnographers all over the world may find it difficult to go to the field to get accurate first-hand information, participants are forced to live a life they are not used to like been indoors, observing social distancing, not carrying out their usual forms of greetings such as handshakes, hugging, close interactive session with each other, etc. These have become the new normal (Gomstyn, 2009; Luker and Boettcher, 2020). All these have affected the processes and outcomes of the research of ethnographic research in one way or the other. For instance, it will be difficult to give an accurate/objective report on the ways of life of the people if the group under study is not closely observed, the stipulated time set by researchers will elapse leading to research to be prolonged and adding extra cost to the researcher. As earlier stated various means are used to carry out ethnographic research during the Covid-19 pandemic but these means are not one hundred percent reliable and are full of uncertainties that can hamper the result of ethnographic research. However, many of these means especially electronic and computer devices should be greatly improved to accommodate the excesses that can be caused by future pandemics as well as still be able to help researchers achieve their goal of acquiring first-hand information about a group. Again in times of pandemics, researchers should be able to properly educate their participants on the potentiality of sudden emergencies that may require an alteration in the pre-designed research pattern so that proper and adequate information would be elicited when the need arises. Government organizations, Non-Governmental organizations, World Health Organization, Universities, and other organizations are advised to join efforts together to support researchers in cushioning the unplanned impacts in times of pandemics and other similar sudden outbreaks. These organizations, research funders, and governments should be proactive by setting aside 'emergency funds' and be ready to provide additional funding for emergencies in researches and make favorable policies that can help researchers and their participants achieve the best results even in the time of future pandemics. In essence, flexibility, malleability, and adaptation are advocated for researches in future pandemics and health emergencies.

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