

## THE RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL MEDIA CHANNELS IN PRESENT DAY COMMUNICATION REALITIES

*Oluebube Amarauche Chukwu & Luke Ifeanyi Anorue*

*Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Traditional modes of communication are thought to be in its decline stages. This belief could easily hold sway especially with the quantum increase in modern day communication technologies and its mind-blowing abilities. This study examines in close detail the relevance of traditional media of communication in relation to existing modern media of communication. In traditional Nigerian and African societies, there have been in existence various means of communication exchange ranging from the gong to the flute, the age grade organizations to the open market. It is the aim of this study to examine albeit in close detail, the relevance, if any, of the still existing modes of communication exchange in traditional Nigerian societies.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Traditional Media of Communication, Traditional Media, Requires the Utilization of Values*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary times, traditional modes of communication have found a way to remain relevant. Traditional modes of communication are unarguably still in existence within our communities in Nigeria, Africa and other parts of the world where there is still the gap to be bridged by New Media and its numerous devices. Various scholars have used different terms to define, explain and refer to traditional media such as - Local media, Folk media, Oramedia (Ugboajah, 1985), and Informal media, Indigenemedia (Akpabio, 2003).

Traditional media channels are any form of endogenous communication system which by virtue of its origin, form and integration into specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilization of values, symbolism, institution and ethos of the most culture through its unique qualities and attributes (Ansu-Kyeremah, 1998). Ndolo (2005) defines traditional media as “indigenous, credible and acceptable channels of communication utilized by rural dwellers for various societal functions including dissemination of messages.” According to Ukonu and Wogu (2008), the traditional system of communication refers to “modes of meaning exchange that are rooted in a people’s culture, and which began from the era of preliterate and pre-modern man.” Ugboajah (as cited in Nwosu, 1990) defined traditional media as the products of the interplay between a traditional community’s customs and conflicts, harmony and strife, cultural convergences and divergences, culture-specific tangibles and intangibles interpersonal relations, symbols and codes and oral traditions which include mythology, oral literature (poetry, folk tales, proverbs), masquerades, witchcraft, rites, rituals, music,

dance, drama, costumes and similar abstractions and artifacts which encompass a people's factual, symbolic and cosmological existence from birth to death and even beyond death.

Traditional media of communication are home-grown arrangements or channels for the exchange and dissemination of cultural values and norms, symbols and meanings which are well acceptable and known by local community citizens. It entails the knowledge of such arrangements and its dutiful applications over time.

According to Akpabio (2003), the principles of all definitions of traditional media shows it is a part and parcel of the way of life of a people which utilizes symbolisms from the community, the values of the community as well as age-long institutions that come into play in the communication process.

Dede (1997) observed that Africa's traditional modes of communication form the interplay or synthesis of the traditional customs and conflicts of a community, its harmony, and discord, its cultural affinities and disparities as well as culture-specific values and practices.

Even Ukonu and Wogu (2008) agree enthusiastically when they stated that "traditional communication encompasses a people's total way of life, including concepts and objects that do not deal directly with communication as a subject."

It is pertinent to note that since the dawn of refinement in society or civilization, communication systems have been of utmost importance in the growth and advancement, survival and continuity of any society. It is by means of communication and its forms of delivery that exchange of ideas and feelings, societal systems whether economic, health and socio-political are realized.

In the realm of the traditional system of communication, Africans in general and Nigerians in particular as regards this presentation were known to have their own communication channels through which they reached out to their own mass audiences. These communication channels would include large billows of smoke; the shrill cry of the village town crier well armed with his gong and strategically positioned in each vicinity wherein he travels; the sound of the massive drums often located at a central place in the community and the sonorous flutes which could be heard meters away if not miles; the age grade system for exchanges among citizens of the same age bracket and the ever-abiding oral narratives for instruction and for entertainment.

African traditional communication extends to the entirety of the ways and customs of Africans which involves symbolism, oral traditions, oral literature, masquerades and witchcrafts, rites of proceedings, rituals, customs, music, dance, costumes, perceptions and abstractions, and artifacts.

## **GROUPS OF INSTRUMENTAL AND DEMONSTRATIVE MODES OF COMMUNICATION**

Traditional media of communication exist in various forms of types, shapes, and sizes. Wilson (1991) isolated them into ten distinct groups. They are –

### **Idiophones**

They are self sounding instruments which when struck, produce sounds depending on how they are struck. Examples include the Ogene (gong) and the Ekwe (slit drum).

### **Membranophones**

A stretched membrane which is usually the hide of a cattle, antelope or goat is fixed to a cylinder hewn out of wood. They make sounds when the stretched membranes vibrate when struck. Examples include talking drums.

### **Aerophones**

Aerophones produce sound due to vibrations coming from a column of air. Aerophones are used to convey particular messages. Flutes, horns, and pipes are perfect examples.

### **Symbolographics**

It is the use of cryptic representations in the form of writing which was made on hard or surfaces, the rind of bamboo, walls or the ground. It is a symbolic writing mode which was employed in communication among members of a social group (Dede, 1997). An example is the "Nsibidi" form of writing which was credited to ethnic nationalities in present-day South East Nigeria.

### **Signals**

Signals encompass gestures, actions or sound which convey information. They include canon shots, gunshots, and great fires. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, if a canon shot is released at night, it signifies the occurrence of death of an eminent son of the community and obsequies are to commence. It is also used to announce the arrival of a corpse or the lowering of a corpse into the grave.

Gunshots are used to announce the arrival of an eminent personality during social occasions.

### **Objectifies/Iconographics**

This mode consists of the use of some objects as a means of communication. It is a process in which an object refers to a thing, event or concept. Examples include the presentation of white chalk which symbolizes peace; kola nuts to guests and exchange of cowries as a means of business transactions.

### **Color Schemes**

The use of colors or a combination of colors bear messages and portends meanings. The color Black represents mourning. The color Red indicates danger and sacredness while the color White signifies purity.

### **Music**

Music as a demonstrative mode of communication serves as a medium of entertainment as well as a significant tool of spreading and sharing thoughts, emotions, and ideas. Lyrics serve as a verbal mode for storing and sharing knowledge and experience in areas of religion, morals, politics and family life. Examples would include praise or satirical songs.

### **Extra-Mundane Communications**

This is communication between the living and the dead. It takes the form of divination, libation, sacrifice, trance, witchcraft, incantations, and invocations. This type of traditional communication is used to commune with supernatural beings.

### **Symbolic Displays**

They are mostly used to convey emotions. Such symbolic displays include sticking tongue out while stretching the eyes with both hands; waving; shrugging; winking and the like.

### **Traditional Media Channels**

Some traditional media of communication are Town Criers, Religious groupings, Village Square meetings/assembly, the Open Market, Age Grade organizations, Oral narratives, Songs, Riddles, Proverbs, Appellations, Tales, Idioms, Smoke Signals, Sound/Musical instruments, Visits, the family and a whole lot.

### **Town Criers**

The town crier's job is usually carried out in the early hours of the morning when village citizens are gradually whirling out of sleep. In exceptional cases, he can be seen and heard making the rounds in the noon-day when there is an immediate occurrence which the village authorities deem fit that the citizenry is made aware of. He performs his job with the aid of a sonorous gong. With the gong and his shrill voice, he informs the village citizens of recent events that are about to occur or that just occurred, important meetings, ceremonies, and imminent danger. The Town Crier serves as the link between the village leadership and the citizens. Qualifications for this all-important job would include a shrill voice, oratorical skills and a comprehensive knowledge of the norms and culture of the village.

### **Religious Groups**

Even before the advent of Christianity, local religious gatherings or consultations were used in communication transfer from the Chief Priest to villagers in private or as a group. Messages from the gods of the community were delivered to the community through the oracle of the gods who is the chief priest. The gods direct their worshippers and provide guidance and prescribe offertory as required for their regular appeasement.

### **Village Square Assembly/Meetings**

Mass meetings of which generality of villagers is summoned are held in the village square. The Town crier serves as a medium of disseminating the message for the villagers to assemble. It is at the village square meetings that villagers are allowed to make their inputs in matters of general concern such as issues on community development, organization of the market, road building and maintenance, recruitment of young and able-bodied men for war, selection of palace guards and other sundry issues. At the village square assembly, snippets of information that were highlighted by the Town Crier are elucidated.

### **Open Market**

The open market is usually located in a central place within the village or very near to it. The open markets usually have a cycle of four-day intervals. Within the market, economic activities are consummated but also, various sorts of communication activities thrive. In the open markets, there is the dissemination of news among traders and visitors to the market, a transference of opinions and ideas even rumors. The open market serves as a medium for the communication for righteous living and this is by way of parading and humiliating thieves, murderers, adulterers and the like when the market is in session, new articles for trade are displayed, masquerades and new traditional dance forms are also exhibited in the open market.

### **Age Grades**

They are social groupings for children, adult men, and women who are within the same age range which is usually between the ages of one to six years. These age-grade groups would have adopted a specific name by which they are identified and addressed. They adopt names based on varying reasons which are usually influenced by the current happenings in their community at the time when they were formed or a major characteristic of members of the age grade or they would be named after the grand patron of their age grade. Within the age-grade groups, they carry out functions assigned to them in developing their villages such as road clearing and maintenance, preparing mud bricks when building the house of a member, and enforcing decisions that have been mandated upon them. They equally pass down the norms and traditions to the younger age-grade groups.

### **Oral Narratives**

Tradition in the form of norms, cultural values and heritages were passed from older generations to younger ones by word of mouth in the form of tales, proverbs, riddles, supplications, and songs. From the past till the present, oral tradition has remained ever-abiding and is even waxing stronger. This is as it both serves as a form of entertainment, the impartation of wisdom and a means of communication. Riddles were used as a means of communicating among individuals to bring an errant member of society back to the acceptable codes of behavior. Riddles being puzzles in the form of a question and with

a slant of rhyme was used to bring issues out in the open for the defaulting member of society or group to go on a journey of introspection and thereafter behave as expected in accordance to the laws of the community. Songs were used to eulogize the achievements of great men and women of the community, to announce the birth and death of citizens, special events and for moral instruction, awareness, and rectitude. Supplications were used in communicating with the ancestors and the gods of the community for protection and inculcating acceptable standards of behavior and group awareness.

### Visits

Africans are great bearers of goodwill. The most practiced social function by Africans is paying visits. During visits, cultural dialogues are exchanged over palm wine and kola nuts between the host and his visitor. Visits are a huge avenue in fostering relationships among friends and relatives. This is even as information is shared and meanings are assimilated among the parties involved in the exchange.

### TRADITIONAL MEDIA CHANNELS: THE RELEVANCE THEREIN

Assortments of traditional systems of communication were in existence in Africa before the birth of the modern mass communication media. The traditional channels of communication enabled our ancestors and forebears, traditional rulers and citizens of communities to share and exchange ideas and for knowledge transference. Eminent African scholars have already noted that traditional media have survived from the earliest of times and made an adjusted transition into the electronic age. It is known that our traditional communication systems have undergone changes of their own and have retained both their basic modes and significance (Ekwelie and Okonkwo, 1983).

It is without gainsaying that in all nooks and crannies of modern Africa and Nigeria, in spite of all the hi-tech equipment and top of the range, cutting edge communication gadgets which are in existence, African traditional communication systems are still alive, buoyant and serving the people of rural dwellings and semi-rural dwellings and meeting their communication needs as regards the dissemination of information for their daily living.

The traditional media are deeply rooted in the peoples' culture and remain valid to the people as channels for the facilitation of exchange of ideas, even where the society becomes urbanized or a person moves from rural to an urban area. The validity of the traditional media is not restricted to only remote rural areas but because people who live in urban areas have a tradition they grew up with, the media of communication associated with that tradition remain influential to them despite the change in the physical environment. Therefore, the validity and potency of traditional modes of communication as a means of reaching and communicating with a vast majority of Nigerians especially rural dwellers is not in doubt.

Even MacBride (1980) in his thesis stated that "people in the towns of the third world often belonging to the first generation of settlers in urban conditions retain their traditions and their fondness for remembered styles in song, dance, and story. In urban areas of industrialized countries throughout the world, vestiges of traditional communication survive as a component of educational, cultural and entertainment activities."

Wilson (1997) opined that in spite of the overly presumptuous claims by some writers of the imminent replacement of the traditional modes of communication by the western media, the reality is that all the supposedly modern cities in Nigeria and other parts of Africa employ different aspects of these traditional media in their daily living. He went on to state that African societies would even lose much of their vibrancy and tenacity without these traditional media and its channels.

It is a well-known fact and observable phenomena that in our rural communities in Nigeria, the Town Crier's role is yet to be usurped by the mobile telecommunication gadgets or even the fixed wireless telephony system. As telecommunication masts and underground cables are yet to cover most Nigerian rural areas, citizens of a community are still summoned for general meetings by their local authorities through the aid of the indefatigable Town Crier while in some other cases, the sound of the great 'Ikoro' (a deep sounding Slit Drum) would command total silence in the community and lead to obedience in the demands of the 'Ikoro' which is usually to announce the death of an eminent citizen of the commune or to announce an ominous occurrence in the village.

It is pertinent to note that even in communities where telecommunication masts dot the landscape like in the author's ancestral home, the traditional modes of communication are still in high fashion. Village meetings are still summoned through the instrumentality of the Town Crier and his ever sonorous gong; information of recent events within the community are still broadcast through the same medium; news of happenings in faraway lands which would affect the village are also broadcast by the Town Crier; age grade meetings; women's group meetings; weddings; coronations for new kings; title taking ceremonies for chiefs; prescribed punishments for offenders and defaulters and a whole lot of events, these are still carried by the Town Crier.

In semi-urban and rural areas of Nigeria, even in well-developed areas, celebratory gunfire has been known to be put to use in announcing the arrival of an eminent personality. In the case of death, canons have been known to be fired and gunshots too to announce the lowering into the grave of such a one for whom it has been deemed fit to receive such an honor. Oral narratives which encompass forms of impartation of knowledge, entertainment and a means of communication are still relevant. These forms are still used even till tomorrow to correct errant youth and to enliven the atmosphere, especially during evenings.

During title taking ceremonies, songs are still sung in the adulation of deserving men and women who have been found worthy to receive the titles upon which they were to be conferred. Even when babies are born in present-day Nigeria, the women folk especially are so happy that they have been known to burst out in songs of thanksgiving to the Creator and in praise for the woman who had the ability to deliver the baby. In the event of death, especially of someone who has been deemed great or someone who was greatly loved, songs still serve as a means of expressing immense sorrow about the person who has just died or for one whose remembrance elicits such emotional response in the form of songs. This is very much still in practice in the modern world even across continental cultures.

Color schemes still portend meanings and bear messages. Various colors and its combinations still represent various groups and bear meaning – secret groups, danger, purity, and mourning.

In present-day communication realities, extra-mundane communications are still in top-notch practice among adherents to such a system. Extramundane communications involve pouring libations, offering sacrifice, chants, incantations, and invocations.

These have never been offered to the ancestral gods through the internet which is an agent of modern communication methods. Communication with supernatural beings has never been known to be conducted through the use of modern media regardless of its mind-blowing abilities.

Emotions are an integral part of the human psyche. They are continual. Hence symbolic displays the traditional style will always be in practice as it is a means of conveying heartfelt meanings even in the face of modern communication realities.

The oral tradition when closely observed is discovered to encourage and perform those attributes that have been credited to modern media of communication which include-

- investigation or society watch which tends to share the knowledge that has been acquired of the environment;
- rectification and improvement of segments of society
- passing down societal heritage from generation to generation
- entertainment and recreation.

From the foregoing, it is evident in our present-day global existence that African traditional communication systems are alive and are being put into good use in the dissemination of information to members of our various distinct communities.

## CONCLUSIONS

African traditional communication systems have been in existence and are still thriving, much so in the face of present-day modern communication realities. These traditional modes of communication not only dominated all other sources of knowledge transfer in the pre-colonial and colonial era of Nigeria's existence, but they have also continued to be relevant in modern Nigeria. In most Nigerian communities/rural dwellings the broad functions of these traditional modes of communication have not changed. This in effect speaks volumes of the continual relevance of these traditional modes of communication.

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