

TRADITIONAL SYSTEMS OF COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

In this modern time, any practice “traditional” or “indigenous” is considered by apologists of modernity as primitive and archaic. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to advance argument for the utilization of traditional system of communication in the development process of Nigeria. The paper touches on the functions of traditional system of communication by taking note of the systems ability to mobilize the rural people for community development and national consciousness, the enlightenment of the people in cultural, political, health and other programmes leading to self-actualization; public entertainment through arts, cultural festivals, musicals and dramatic performances; and other communication purposes leading to group and national cohesiveness. Considering the fact that the traditional information minister (town crier) is the only credible source of information for the rural areas, this paper advises that his mobility and instrument should be improved to enhance his performance.

Introduction

Communication or information dissemination are twin concepts that are interchangeably used to describe the method of spreading news within a society or community. In Nigerian traditional society, the means of disseminating information varied from one ethnic group to another. In whatever form the traditional system is used to achieve its aim, it is undoubtedly a success factor in a developing society. The system serves not only as a source of information, but also education and entertainment to the people at the grassroots. Unfortunately, the general notion on traditional system of communication is that, they are outdated or better put, primitive. This same view often envisages traditional systems as being mutually antagonistic to what is generally known as modern systems of communication (Field, 1973). But the fact is that although the systems may be old and different in their principles from the new systems introduced from abroad, they remain what essentially sustain the information needs of the rural population.

In traditional African society, information are disseminated through recognized officials, recognizable sounds, signs and symbols. “The town crier” as the newsmen or newsvendors are popularly called, combined all the information agencies in the performance of their duty. The tools employed in the course of disseminating information in the traditional environment varied from place to place, with their attendant problems afflicting the development of the system. Solutions are however, proffered in this paper in order to promote the utilization of the traditional system of communication in Nigeria.

It is hoped that this paper will engender the spirit of revivalism in all stakeholders in our traditional institutions, so that present and future generations will live to keep the traditional systems of communication of our people alive and improve upon it.

Communication in Pre-Literate Nigerian Society

Indigenous Nigerian society had no news-paper, but had agencies and institutions which in several respects served the same purposes as the modern day information dissemination facilities (Omu, 1978:1). The traditional media served its purposes to the satisfaction of the rural people in pre-colonial era – the people’s desire for information about local people and events, the satisfaction of news hunger stimulated war or rumours of war, the necessity to spread information about political and religious decisions as well as threats to security etc.

In his study of the subject-matter, Omu (1978:1-3), classified the agencies of communication in pre-colonial Nigeria into two groups they are;

1. The oral communication or informal transference media and
2. The organized communication or formal transference media

According to Omu, the first category, that is the oral or informal communication, operated through informal contact, between individuals and persons, and did not go beyond the circulation or dissemination of rumours and “unofficial” information. A primary example of oral communication media system is family visitation. It was common then as now to visit relations and friends in their homes and in the process, exchange the latest information, either from within the immediate community or beyond.

Information dissemination was also enhanced by means of organized and spontaneous gatherings which were fairly frequent in Nigeria society. Examples are birth and burial ceremonies. These ceremonies have always attracted large congregations from far and near. As the ceremonies progressed amidst tears and wailing, the bereaved found time to exchange information particularly about people and events. The same cross-transference of ‘news’ took place when a new baby was born, and during village festivals, marriage, circumcision feasts, public meetings and traditional court sessions, moonlight gatherings etc. In all these, information were circulated.

Trade was another informal media system in preliterate Nigerian society. Most communities had markets which did not only serve as centres of trade but also as principal agents of communication, information and recreation. The trading forum provided the most convenient opportunities to meet friends and kinsmen from far and near distances during which the traders exchanged news and other information. Some markets were also the terminal points of trade routes linking different parts of the country with neighbouring states. The caravans and traders who plied the routes helped to distribute information (Onuora, 1981).

The second category of traditional media or what Omu referred to as formal transference media system, was concerned with the more systematized dissemination of information between the traditional administrative organ and the people (subjects). The means by which the traditional government reached out to her subjects varied from sounds, signs to symbol, and the central disseminator was the “town crier”.

Traditional Forms of Communication in Nigeria

There are various traditional forms of communication in different parts of Nigeria. Wilson (1987) had broadly categorized them into the following classes, namely:

- (i) Idiophones
- (ii) Membranophones
- (iii) Aerophone
- (iv) Symbolography
- (v) Signals
- (vi) Signs
- (vii) Objectifics
- (viii) Colour schemes
- (ix) Music
- (x) Extra-mundane communication
- (xi) Symbolic display

The “town criers”, also known by other appellation as traditional newsmen, newsvendors, newsreporters, correspondents, news agents, messengers (emissaries), spokesmen (or women), envoys (ambassadors), contactmen, couriers, postmen, broadcasters, heralds etc, employed all the forms of communication in the performance of their duty.

(i) **Idiophones:** These are self-sounding instruments or technical waves which produce sound without the addition or use of an intermediary medium. The sound or message emanates from the materials from which the instruments are made, and they could be shaken, scratched, struck, pricked (pulled) or pressed with the feet. In this group are gong, woodlock, wooden drum, bell and rattle. The loud-sounding gong common among the people of the Niger-Delta of Nigeria, the wooden drum called “ekwe” among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria are used to announce the promulgation of laws and regulations, meetings, arrangements for communal works and generally spread “official” information to the community (Wilson, 1981).

(ii) **Mebranophones:** These are media on which sound is produced through the vibration of membranes. They include all skin or leather drum. These drums are beaten or struck with well-carved sticks. Among the various Nigerian traditional societies, skin or leather drums of various sizes and shapes abound. The most popular however is the Yoruba “talking drum” locally called “dundun”. The “talking drum” is commonly used during traditional ceremonies. In his comment Omu (1978) asserted that from exploratory investigations, the Yorubas have an impressive array of talking drum-sets, and probably possess the richest heritage of drums in the south-western zone of Nigeria. It is widely acknowledged that when some of these drums are expertly sounded, they are capable of conveying specific meaning. In Yoruba land for instance, the “talking drums” are able to imitate all the tones and gibes in Yoruba speech. In addition to producing music for dancing, the drums direct the movements of dancers and, at social gatherings, the “talking drums” could also be used to announce the arrival and departure of important persons.

The Yoruba “talking drums” also had the capacity for mischief. As the drum is used to recite and multiply praise-names, so also, it can be used to expose the wrong or evil deeds of persons, as well as pour abuses on such person in the community. It was used during the “free-speech festivals” to freely ventilate the people’s opinion about their ruler and his administration.

It also acted as a check on government on issues pertaining to bad governance. In modern times however the use of talking drums in Yoruba land to checkmate government especially in this era of modern democracy, has often led to outbreak of violence.

Some other ethnic groups in Nigeria also have a variety of “talking drums”. The Itsekiri call it Oji, Okha in Edo, Ogri or Igede in Urhobo and Isoko etc. Apart from using them to produce musical sound for dancing, the drums are also used to summon special meetings, proclaim the arrival and departure of important visitors to palace, announce serious acts of sacrilege and disasters, alert the community against invasion and in war advertise the presence of war chief. Today, the story is different. Modern facilities for disseminating information have taken over the functions of traditional information system.

(iii) **Aerophones:** These comprise media of the flute family-whistle, reed pipes, horns and trumpet. They produce sound as a result of the vibration of a column of air. Common in traditional societies in Nigeria are the gourd horn, and ivory horn called “ekpere” among the Ika people of Delta State. Apart from being used as musical instrument, they are also used to announce the arrival and departure of icons at gatherings.

(iv) **Symbolography:** This simply means symbolic writing or representation. They are used to convey a message which is understood within the context of a known social event and an accompanying verbal message. It is a descriptive representational device for conveying meaning. Symbols usually carry along with them connotative meanings which according to Rose (1962) requires an interpreter who knows something about the system by virtue of which the symbol has meaning. For instance, among the communities of Delta State, the

fresh unfolding frond of the palm tree usually greenish yellow in colour tied at the front and the back of a vehicle, indicates that the vehicle is carrying corpse. There are several of this in other communities in Nigeria.

- (v) **Signals:** These are the physical embodiments of a message. Signals include fire, gunshots, cannon shorts, smoke, drum (wooden or skin). Signals generally attract attention. In Nigeria for example, broadcasting stations begin transmission on daily basis by first drawing the attention of listeners with drum signals. Similar signals are also sounded at the close of the day's transmission of programmes. Elsewhere in Nigeria, the booming of gun is used to either announce the death of important personalities or to warn the people against imminent danger. The interment of the remains of great personality especially among the Urhobo and other communities of Delta State, is also announced by booming of cannon shots. The use of smoke was also a signal that danger was imminent. Different thickness had particular significances.
- (vi) **Signs:** Any meaningful marks or objects or symbols used to represent something are signs. They were commonly used in time past during inter tribal or ethnic wars or invasion to convey non-verbal messages. Sign language is used to communicate with the deaf. During the colonial era, different communities in Nigeria developed different sign languages through which the presence of colonial agents in the community was announced to the able-bodied men. Immediately the sign alert was made, the youths and other able-bodied men went into hiding to avoid being used by the colonial government as forced labour.
- (vii) **Objectifics:** Media presented in concrete forms which may have significance for a specific society only, or may be universal through their traditional association with specific meanings. Objectifics include Kola-nut, the young unopened bud of palm frond, charcoal, white pigeon or fowl, white eggs, feather, cowries, mimosa, flowers, sculptures, pictures, flags, etc. The most common and perhaps most universal is the use of flowers to convey love. In most Nigerian communities, the presentation of kola nut to visitors shows that such a visitor is loved and welcomed to his host residence.
- (viii) **Music:** The significance of music in any society is overwhelming. Itinerant musical groups sing satirical songs, praise songs and can also use music to criticize wrong doings of individuals in society. They describe the physical or personality attributes of such individuals, where they live or what they do for a living.
- (ix) **Colour Schemes:** The use of colours conveys different meanings. Among the prominent colours used to communicate different meanings are red, white, black, green, yellow, brown and turquoise. Of all these colours, red, white and black convey a universal meaning in the Nigerian society. Red signifies danger; black is evil and white is love. Combinations of these colours convey certain significant meanings for the traditional society, as well as in modern advertising.
- (x) **Extra-Mundane Communication:** This is communication between the living and the dead, the supernatural or Supreme Being. It is not restricted to Nigeria traditional society alone, other African countries and beyond are involved in extra-mundane communication. It is usually done through incantation, spiritual chants, rituals, prayers, sacrifice, invocation, séance, trance, hysterics or libation. Cultural ritual performance evokes intensity of emotion which may lead to a temporary spiritual transmigration of the participants as in religious or spiritual ceremonies. Such a performance conveys the elements of a cultural celebration, dedication and consecrations as witnessed in funeral rites and marriage. Modern forms of extra-mundane communication are found in obituary and in memorial notices published in newspaper, radio, television and so on.

- (xi) **Symbolic Displays:** These have the following attributes, smiling, sticking out the tongues, winking the eyes, expression of anger, disgust, happiness and fear. All these convey meanings at different times and in different traditional environment in Nigeria.

Problems Facing Traditional System of Communication in Nigeria

Numerous problems afflict the traditional system of communication in Nigeria thereby retarding its growth and development. Chief among these problems is the lack of a standard technical vocabulary in the description, analysis and conceptualization of the media/channels and processes of the traditional communication system. For example, the extra-mundane communication system does not have a standard vocabulary that is universal to all communities in Nigeria.

Similarly, the absence of an appropriate language which can be universally applied in this description is another problem affecting traditional communication system. Nigeria is a multi-lingual society and the constitution guarantees freedom of movement to and residence in any part of ones choice. Under this situation, it becomes difficult to carry strangers along with the use of indigenous language in the rural areas. Wilson (1987) however, suggested three solutions to this problem:

- i. Retaining and using indigenous names along with descriptive labels in the lingua franca (English).
- ii. Using only descriptive labels in English language
- iii. Inventing or coining alternative words, and then validating these coinages at community conferences through promulgation.

Another problem afflicting the traditional system of communication in Nigeria is the diversity in the traditional political system and the conflict between it and the adopted system (American democracy) which usually requires the use of modern media structures, policies and facilities. In Nigeria it has been observed that the central authority undermines the traditional communication system in its information dissemination process, thereby leading to misinterpretation of information in the rural communities.

Scientific problems also affect traditional system of communication in Nigeria. It has been observed that some of the technical hardwares in use in traditional system of communication are not easily preserved even though they can be replicated. In some cases no two disparate societies are known to use exactly the same hardware for the dissemination of information on related issues.

Functions of Traditional System of Communications in Nigeria.

It is not arguable that the real problem that afflicts the traditional communication system in Nigeria is the inability of scholars to detach themselves from western theories, and in turn detach traditional media system in a certain sense from the general current of activities within the society and see it as a unique system which needs a greater study and understanding.

However, some key functions and characteristics of the traditional system of communication are easily discernible. First, it helps to mobilize the people at the grassroots level towards community development and national consciousness. Dennis (1975) in his book titled "Mass Media in Black Africa" stated that "no serious mass-oriented programme ever succeeds without the active involvement of the practitioners within the traditional system. He opined that much of the failure that herald government mass-orientation programme are traceable to the fact that policy makers at the national level fail to utilize the powerful and credible traditional channels of communication.

Secondly, traditional system of communication serves as a source of cultural, political, health and other educational and enlightenment programmes for the masses leading them towards self-actualization and national development. When policies are made by the makers at the central level, execution or implementation of the decisions is carried out at the grassroot level. It is here that the traditional system of communication plays its vital role.

Thirdly, traditional communication is a source of entertainment during arts and cultural festivals, musicals, and dramatic performances by choral and masquerade groups. Visit to shrines and oracles does not only satisfy the entertainment yearnings of visitors, but also educate the visitors on aspects of the culture of the rural people.

Fourthly, it gives expression to cultural and other activities of the different parts of a nation. Through celebration of festivals, for example, wide aspects of a cultural system are exposed to other cultures and greater understanding and appreciation of differences takes place. Through this, cross-

cultural fertilization takes place and the society and mankind in general, becomes better (Aboyade, 1981).

Traditional communication is also used for intra-cultural, intercultural and other communication purposes for group and national unity. The new yam festivals common in various parts of southern Nigeria, the Eyo festive in Lagos, Argungu fishing festival in Jigawa state are all examples of traditional communication set-ups that lead to intercultural communication and even mass communication.

Conclusion and Recommendations

No doubt, this paper like a re-enactment has brought into focus the various means and processes involved in traditional systems of communication in Nigeria. In all the means through which information was disseminated in pre-literate Nigerian society, the processes revolved round the traditional newsmen or “town crier”. In the course of the performance of his duty, he used different instruments or tools and signs. Problems facing the development of traditional systems of communication were highlighted in the paper. The functions of traditional systems of communication in the rural communities were also emphasized in this paper.

It is however observed that the proliferation of modern means of communication has its drawback on the continuous use of traditional systems of communication in the rural community. Traditional institutions now prefer to reach out to their subjects through radio, television, print media or even the cell phone. While the use of these modern communication facilities help to carry non-indigenes along in rural governance, it does not promote the development of traditional systems of communication in Nigeria. Consequently, future generation may be forced to lose vital knowledge in the traditional systems of communication in their communities.

Recommendations

Customs and traditions are preserved for the purpose of meaningful development. It is therefore paramount for the present generation to preserve and develop their traditional systems of communication so that future generation will have a better tomorrow.

In as much as culture is dynamic and does not neglect modernity, a wholistic preference to the use of modern communication facilities in our rural environment may spell doom for future generations. Therefore, it is suggested that modern communication facilities should be used simultaneously with traditional communication systems in the rural community. By this measure, the culture of the people in this regard, is preserved for future generation and non-indigenes on the other hand, are not left out in the development of the rural community. Traditional instruments or tools used in disseminating information in the rural community should be well preserved to ensure their long term utility.

The traditional newsmen or “town crier” makes his rounds on foot on his broadcasting. Therefore, this paper suggests that he should be mobilized with modern means of transportation, and also be paid stipend by his community, to enhance his performance. This paper aligns with Ugboajah (1972) who asserted that traditional communication system is the only credible source of information for rural areas, therefore, no attempt should be made to destroy it under the guise of modernization or innovation.

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