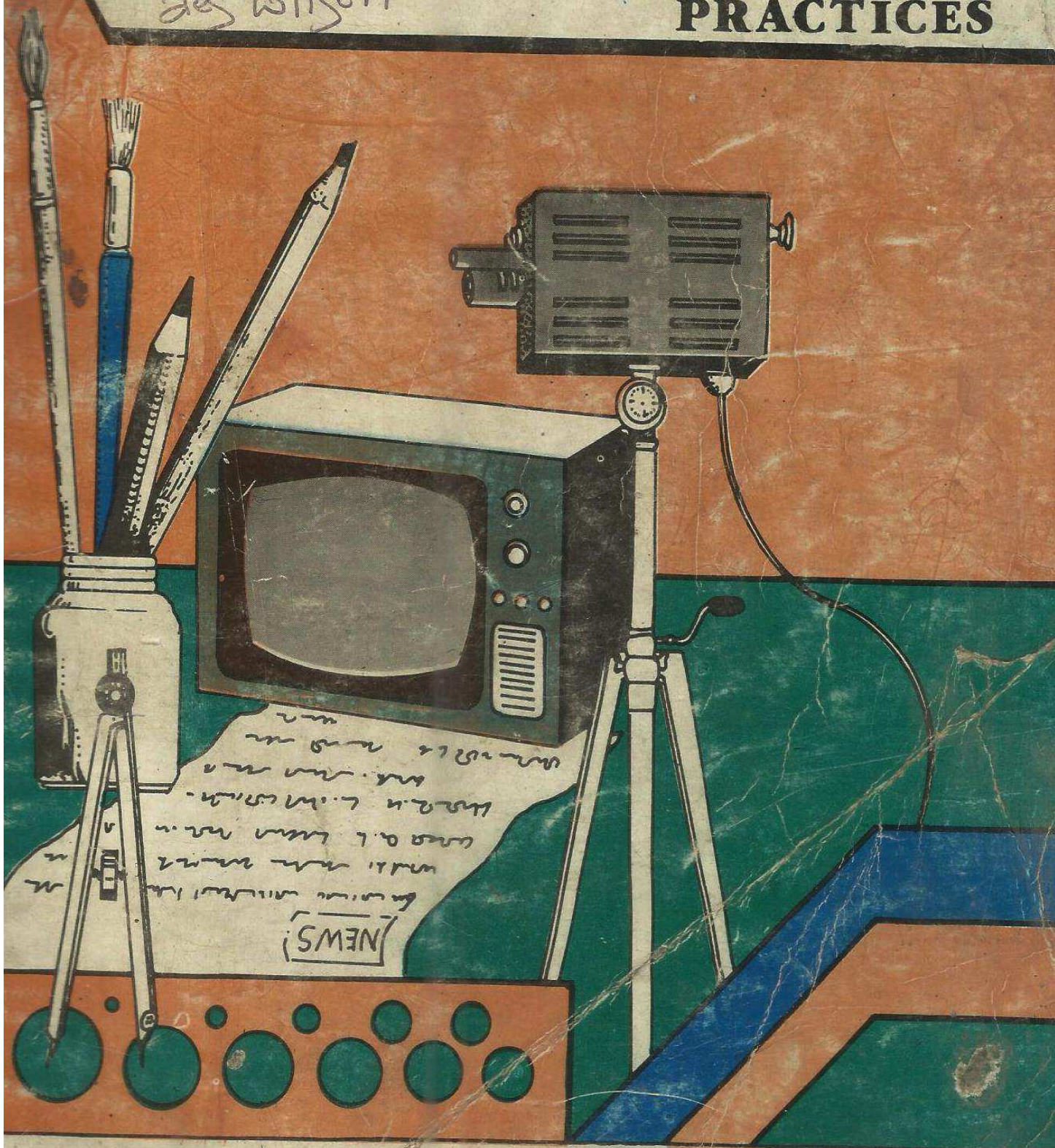


COMMUNICATION ARTS

PRINCIPLES APPLICATIONS PRACTICES

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Traditional Communication **23** Media Systems

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OBJECTIVES

At the end of reading through this chapter you should be able to:-

- [i] *identify some of the key concepts involved in oramedia systems*
- [ii] *show some knowledge of the nature and character of traditional media systems*
- [iii] *identify the types of traditional media systems*
- [iv] *identify the functions of traditional communication*
- [v] *show some understanding as to how oramedia can be viewed as part of the mass media systems*
- [vi] *make your prediction of the future of oramedia in the context of world communication*

1. INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS

Writing about traditional communication media and systems is gradually gaining some respectability among African scholars given the corpus of literature that has recently emerged. Thanks to the untiring efforts of the late Professor Frank Okwu Ugboajah, who along with others showed that this eclectic area of media studies was worthy of serious academic concern.

A time there was when any discussion on these would only elicit something akin to an alarm by one's colleagues, a concern which sometimes bordered on whether one had almost reached the end of the road in one's academic pursuits. All that has changed now. Traditional communication literature is fast becoming the toast at conferences and even previous doubters have suddenly become the apostles of what is now known as trado-modern communication.

But what is traditional communication about which most scholars are now turning their attention to? Is it just a passing fad that will soon disappear? What are really its implications for the future? We shall examine these questions shortly. What constitutes traditional communication is today a hybrid from other fields of study, namely, anthropology, history, sociology, linguistics, music, religion, mythology, and an amalgam of multifarious cultural practices which have become standard. Thus traditional communication is an admixture of social conventions and practices which have become sharpened and blended into veritable communication modes and systems and which have almost become standard practices for society. When viewed from this perspective, traditional communication involves all the social conventions and practices, modes of speech and social organisations whose chief

concerns may not be with communication but with other activities. Traditional communication is perhaps the most important way by which ruralites communicate among themselves and in effect with others. In rural society this is, for a large majority, the only means of getting information about events around them and sometimes events outside.

2. NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION.

Traditional communication is a complex system of communication which pervades all aspects of rural and urban life in Africa. It is complex in the sense that it is not only one system but a network of media systems which operate at various levels of society. In reality, it is simple in its operation and it depends on trust for its credibility.

It displays a variety of characteristics which give it a unique image of its own. These characteristics include its dynamism and the fact of its being a multi-media and multi-channel system. It is also authoritative, credible, definitive, time-honoured, transactional, customary, ubiquitous, integrative, low-cost, non-alienating, adaptable and invariably quite popular.

3. MODES

Traditional communication systems can be broadly categorised into six modes, namely,

- i. Instrumental Mode of Communication
- ii. Demonstrative Mode of Communication
- iii. Iconographic Mode of Communication
- iv. Extra-Mundane Mode of Communication
- v. Visual Mode of Communication
- vi. Institutional Mode of Communication.

These names are used here principally as descriptive labels as no specific names exist in the corpus of work so far done in the area of traditional communication.

Instrumental communication consists of modes which use idiophones, aerophones, membranophones and symbology. Idiophones are self-sounding instruments which produce sound when they are beaten, pricked, struck or plucked by hand or by the use of a stick. They produce sound without the use of an intermediary medium. The sound emanates from their surfaces. These instruments are capable of producing their own messages or they may produce signals only. They include instruments such as the metal gong, woodblock, wooden drum, bell and rattle.

Aerophones are instruments which produce sound as a result of the vibration of a column of air in them. The sound produced may also be a message or may serve as signal. The instruments used here include whistles, flutes and horns from plants and animals. Some of the best known ones are cow, ivory and deer horns.

Membranophones are communication instruments which are made from the skins of animals. When the membranes are struck or beaten they produce sound which may act as signal or may serve as the message itself. The best known is the 'talking' drum commonly used among the Yoruba-speaking peoples both for music and communication. Symbology is the use of cryptic representation in the form of writing (psuedo-writing) made on surfaces (hard or soft) like the rind of the bamboo, walls, cloth, or the ground. This is a symbolic writing mode or representation which may be employed in communicating among members of an exclusive club. The best known example is the Nsibidi writing which is found among the people of the Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Imo and Anambra States and even beyond to the Camerouns.

Demonstrative mode of communication consists of the use of music and signal in communicating with the people. Music is not just a medium of entertainment but a vehicle for the spread of ideas and doctrines. Signal is the use of instrumental modes of communication to produce sounds that signify or symbolise a communication event within the context of a specific social setting. The sounds of the different drums, flutes, horns, bells and gongs serve as signals of communication. They are often accompanied by oral or visual messages depending on the communication context.

Iconographic mode of communication consists of the use of objects (objectified communication) and floral media. It is a signification in which the object refers to a thing, event or concept. This concrete representation may have a limited meaning or may have a universal application or significance. The presentation of a bowl of kolanut has significance within the context of the presentation and also has symbolic meanings. The same goes for the presentation of charcoal, white pigeon or fowl, white egg, feather, cowries, mimosa, flowers sculptures, etc. Floral communication involves the use of selected flora of the local vegetation for the purpose of communicating specific meanings or ideas to members of the community.

Extra-Mundane mode of communication is a mode which is believed to take place between the living and the dead, or between the living and the supernatural or supreme being. On the surface it usually seems unidirectional but participants at religious crusades, prayer sessions, rituals and other religious and pseudo-spiritual activities know there is often a form of feedback which may come through intrapersonal processes, physical revelations or magical, other-worldly verbalisations. Obituary, and in memoriam notices, and tombstone messages are the graphic forms of this mode of communication. Among some of the other well known forms are incantation, chant, ritual, prayer, sacrifice, invocation, libation, conjuration, witchcraft, exorcism, vision and contemplation.

Visual mode of communication consists of the use of colours and dressing, appearance and general comportment to communicate certain feelings or emotions and attitudes. The user of visual communication

has the advantages of pictorial communication — that is through the use of the speed of impact of the message and the freedom of the visual information from linguistic barriers associated often with written and spoken language.

Institutional mode of communication consists of the use of certain traditional institutions symbolically. The most important of such traditional institutions are marriage, cheifaincy, secret societies, shrines, masks and masquerades. For example, the marriage institution and all ceremonies pertaining to it are a combination of a secular celebration, spiritually akin to christian ritual and cultural communication of the norms and mores of the society or group.

4. THE FUNCTIONS OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION

The traditional communication system is a complex one whose functions transcend the ordinary oracular postulations of Western communication theorists. Its functions are more diverse and far-reaching than it is at times admitted. Part of the problem of really defining the functions of the traditional communication system lies in the inability of scholars to detach themselves from western theoretical models, and in turn detach traditional media system from the general current of activities within the society and see it as a unique system which requires a greater study and understanding.

However, some of the key functions of the system include the following.

First, it mobilizes the people at the grassroots level towards community development and national consciousness. No serious-minded mass-oriented programme ever succeeded without the active involvement of the practitioners within the traditional system.

Second, it is a source of cultural, political, health and other educational and enlightenment programmes for the masses, leading them towards self-actualization and national development.

Third, it is the dominant source of entertainment through arts and cultural festivals, musical shows, dramatic performances by choral and masquerade groups and other musical and theatrical groups.

Fourth, it is used for intracultural, intercultural and other communication purposes leading to group and national unity. Yam and Ekpo festivals are examples of large traditional communication set-ups which bring about intercultural and mass communication.

Fifth, it gives expression to cultural and other activities of the different parts of the society.

5. ORAMEDIA AS MASS COMMUNICATION

It is the view of this writer that we should apply the term "Mass Communication" to cover the traditional systems of communication. These traditional systems which have been euphemistically referred to as oramedia, should not however be examined in the context of western media practices alone but seen as a unique pre-industrial development techniques that served the needs of the society of the past and have

continued to do so even today. However, it is important to point out that the word 'mass' which suggests such concepts as mass appeal, mass audience, mass society, or even global village, to a number of people, may elicit a scoffing comment from the same group if the meaning were to be extended to cover oramedia.

As a result, it has become necessary to redefine the term mass communication to embrace the media and channels of communication which are usually considered traditional to Africa and elsewhere. Such a redefinition will enhance the understanding of the traditional systems which have made interpersonal, group, and mass communication possible since man first discovered the need to communicate. Such a redefinition disregards the more limited view expressed by Hachten (1971) when he said that

...to have mass communication, a message must be amplified or reproduced many thousands of times.

Messages within the oramedia system may not be 'amplified or reproduced many thousands of times' but certainly within the context of traditional or rural society as well as today's urban society, the closeness of the people to the socio-political system makes it possible for mass communication to take place through the amplification and reproduction of messages within the limits of the society and population.

Whereas the concept of mass communication in the West reflects individualism and machine-oriented activity, the traditional media system in Africa is people-oriented; that is, the community or group is the heart and soul of any communication enterprise. It is the failure of the modern media practitioner to grasp this simple fact that makes western communication practices in Africa seem such a failure when the interests of the majority of the people are considered.

Messages are amplified through the use of communication centres like the village square, market place, the chief's residence, formal and informal channels, local newsmen (gongmen or town criers) and through the use of certain selected traditional instruments. All these reflect the community-mindedness of the traditional systems. These contrast sharply with the elite-oriented nature of western mass media which are extensions of elite tastes and impulses in western societies, which tastes and impulses have been imposed through cultural and media imperialism on the educated elite and consequently on the generality of the society. It is pertinent to point out too that even here this media and cultural imperialism has not had the desired effect on the society but a situation of information void is created when political authority modelled along western lines tries to get information to the ruled through its own channels and in effect ignoring or by-passing traditional authority and its media and channels. Thus if we do not simply count numbers, or become excessively obsessed with the speed of message, the 'sophistication' of media hardware, or anonymity of the audience, then

we may be on our way to assessing oramedia on its terms and securing for ourselves a clearer understanding of the two systems.

6. THE FUTURE OF ORAMEDIA

The communication needs of today are not likely to remain the same for the future because of the dynamics of change. The direction of change could be to the advantage of the society or for the benefit of alien cultures and at a great cost to our society. In the not-so-tenuous relationship that now exists between traditional and western media nothing is quite definite about what the communication policy for the future will be. But it is fairly clear that the general current of scholarly opinion today is that there should be a point of interface between the two, or least for a more effective and meaningful communication enterprises. However, a number of questions related to the present dilemma are pertinent here.

- i. Why do low income people not read newspapers regularly?
- ii. Could it be on account of their poor financial situations, or unavailability of newspapers in their area of domicile?
- iii. Or is it that their low income status is a reflection of their illiteracy?

Not many people will accept the view that illiteracy, unavailability of papers, poor finance are the single factors responsible for the condition of irregular readership of newspapers and magazines although our instinct will tell us that a combination of these and other factors may be directly responsible. The same could be said for television viewership which like the readership of newspaper or magazine has a halo-effect on the use of other media.

But will man in the future continue to rely on oramedia for his communication needs? The answer should be both 'Yes' and 'No'. Yes, because for a number of reasons, most traditional media and channels will continue to be used for various communication purposes. The needs may vary somewhat. And the functions of the media and channels may also vary but to think that they will all become moribund is like making some of the past prognostications regarding the future of other media which are yet to come true. Just as no medium has been wholly replaced by a new medium, apart from having some of its functions taken over by the new medium, there is no likelihood that oramedia will be supplanted by western media. Oramedia are organised around human beings and as far as human beings exist, they will carry out human activities.

Having said that it is needless to repeat the view that man may not be wholly dependent on oramedia as sources of information and other communication needs. The reasons are partly contained in what we have said above in regard to the possibility of man's dependence on oramedia. Some of the functions of these media and channels may be taken over by western media. But as society becomes more complex, it is clear that the inevitability of cross-cultural currents (even in their present forms)

having more dominant influence on communication practices cannot be gainsaid.

Even though many have predicted the demise of oramedia practices, it is like a picture out of a doomsday book — it is imaginary or merely conjectural. Oramedia can be said to have a very bright future within our socio-economic and political circumstances. Its future lies firmly in a trado-modern communication system which combines traditional media practices at various levels of our communication enterprise, with modern media. This combination should take into account the needs of different strata of the society rather than the current practice whereby a generalised conception of societal needs is taken and messages crafted to meet them.

7. PROBLEMS OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION

At present the problems that afflict the traditional media system are numerous and they retard the growth and development of the system.

Chief among these problems is the lack of a standard semantic structure in the description, analysis and conceptualization of the media, channels and processes of the traditional communication system. This means that there is an absence of an appropriate language which can be universally applied in the description. Since most African countries have one foreign language or the other as a means of general expression along with hundreds of other indigenous languages, it is difficult to categorise concepts for the system using acceptable linguistic codes which can be shared by most scholars within the area.

Another difficulty lies in the diversity which exists in the traditional political system, and the relative conflict between it and the adopted system, which usually requires the use of certain media structures, policies and facilities. Since what affects the political system invariably affects the communication processes, it is important to point out that a clearer study of the two systems be undertaken so that a proper marriage could be struck. This would probably bring to an end the political instability which results from the lack of a long tradition of legitimization of the new political processes which has been the bane of the traditional and modern communication systems.

The socio-economic level of the society dictates the kind and nature of communication in the society. The level of socio-economic development in a country, influences the communication activity of each society but does not support the 'limited-reach-and-effectiveness' thesis which is often bandied about to discredit these potent sources and channels of communication in rural societies. In order to improve communication facilities and performance the social and economic life of the people has to be altered in a way that will make them open to communication messages and also be in a position to possess the hardware or have access to it in a public forum when necessary.

Scientific and technological problems also affect the development of traditional communication. The present level of development of the media and channels of communication in the society is low because some of the

technical hardware are not easily preserved even though they can be produced cheaply. Local scientists and technologists should show enough creativity and inventiveness in order to find out and develop better ways of utilizing traditional media instruments to effect more scientific techniques of communication which could be said to be indigenous to Africa. Faster replicability of messages along with a more widely spaced audience should be the chief concern of scientists and technologists.. The research to make this possible should be two-pronged. It should be technological as well as sociological. The technological aspect should take the shape of finding an appropriate local technology that could replace or supplement existing media technology used in the society. The sociological aspect should deal with the relevance and acceptability of the new technology.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by traditional communication system? What are its unique characteristics?
2. Discuss the functions of traditional communication.
3. Do you agree that oramedia should be treated as mass media forms?
4. What are the merits of the trado-modern communication system?
5. Analyze the taxonomy of traditional media systems.
Does this classification scheme fit into the system in your locality?

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