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Towards Integrating Traditional and Modern Communication Systems

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1. Introduction

The catholic thinking among various African communication scholars today revolves around the need to adopt and implement a general policy of integrating the various indigenous traditional communication practices with those practices from abroad which have become popular and which have become entrenched in the culture as it were. Such thinking pervades research in the areas of government, religion, education, science and technology, linguishtics, theatre arts, medicine, psychology and communication, to mention a few. The call for an integration of the two systems is predicated on a vision of a society that does not have to remain in perpetual conflict with those things which it can accommodate and also on the need to streamline our communication policy and system for a greater effectiveness.

For over fity years since broadcasting services reached Nigeria through the British Empire service, a lot has been achieved in terms of the increase in the number of acquired radio receivers and in the number of persons who are exposed to radio messages.

Television services got here for the first time in 1959 when the then Western Nigerian Government established the Western Nigerian Television Service (WNTS). Since then too the number of sets of consumers of television messages has gone up by leaps and bounds. WNTV

In the area of the print medium, Nigerians have been in close touch with books for more than a century but actual production of books did not begin until 1846 when the Presbyterean Mission based in Calabar introduced the first printing machines into the country. Newspaper production followed close behind in 1859 when *Iwe Irohin*, a Yoruba language paper was produced by the Church Missionary Society under Reverend Townsend in Abeokuta.

Over the years, other forms of print and electronic media have been introduced into the country. These forms include posters, video, billboards, telephone, computer, phonograph records, among others. Somehow these quite potent western communication media have remained, in the main, elitist in the content of their messages as well as limited in their reach and effects.

Thus Nigeria like most of Africa remains in a state of socio-cultural infantilism arising from historical and cultural factors. The historical factors are the direct products of the seemingly myopic vision of the society and the oppressive and excruciating colonial experience of the past. These have been

compounded by society's mindless embrace of the technological and other cultural products from outside the African continent through a conspiracy of its elites and alien salesmen. The inevitable coutcome of this unfortunate situation is that indigenous creative afflatus is stultified and a climate of despondency, on the part of the people, is created.

The present stuation thus calls for a serious re-examination of the country's communication policy, an issue which has engaged the attention of administrators and scholars for some time now. Such a re-examination has strong cultural implications which an understanding of the traditional communication system calls for. It is important that we try to study the traditional media and channels of communication in order to achieve success in this direction.

2. Traditional System of Communication

It is useful to see the traditional communication system from the point of view of what it is: a dynamic, multi-media, multi-channel system. The system is authoritative, credible, definitive, time-honoured, transactional, customary and ubiquitous, as well as integrative, low-cost, non alienating, adaptable and popular. It is important too to debunk the popular fallacy that the system is outmoded and its values are impediments to change or obstacles to modernization. And it is also necessary to discard the fanciful view that old traditions are usually replaced by new changes, because both forms are always in conflict. These views are not only theoretically misleading, but also practically unacceptable. Evidence provided by Ronald Escarpit (1968) and Colin Cherry (1978) proves that no one newly-introduced mode of communication or combination of new modes wholly replace or supplant the traditional ones. The fact is that they supplement the old ones or replace some of their functions but never all of their functions.

The traditional system of communication involves a complex process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated by western culture or any other alien influence. The system also refers to the mode of control (ownership) and model of information diffusion. When we say that the traditional communication system is authoritative we mean that it is not only dependent on the political machinery as its source of information especially in its very formal structure and activities involving the generality of the citizens in the society but also motivated by the political legitimization process. Since the social and political systems are closely wedded, communication processes are equally closely allied to the political system since the system itself is a product of the society.

This in effect, guarantees credibility to whatever messages that come from the system. Receivers of the message may disagree with its content but surely they do not doubt the integrity or authority behind it. But sometimes this strictly formal administrative and professional duty of the traditional reporter is often confused with that of the occasional and informal announcer for clubs or associations. This, at times, may account for some of

the distortions that are attributed to the system. However, as it is well known, such distortions are not exclusive to traditional communication processes alone. These additional sources of distortions are like bad and good presses. What the traditional system attempts to eliminate is the babel of voices which is the bane of modern communication because most African traditional political systems are like today's one-party system.

The traditional system is definitive, that is, it is explanatory and illustrative. The messages often contain adequate explanation or exposition on specific news or information. This is so because since traditional communication is also transactional and ubiquitous messages based on directives, news advertising, public relations, entertainment and education are often given adequate treatment as the newsman goes the round of his immediate environment.

It is time-honoured. The traditional media system has existed for a long time; some for periods beyond the memory of history. This characteristic is perhaps responsible for some of the unscholarly statements made against it. The fact of its age has tended to sharpen its rough edges and rooted it more firmly in the society against the ravages of other communication systems.

The system is also customary. By this is meant the fact of its usualness and familiarity with the people. Since it is the acceptable system among not less than seventy per cent of Nigeria's over eighty million citizens, it is extremely difficult and it would be unwise to attempt to replace it.

It is transactional in nature because it combines interpersonal channels along with other modes in reaching its vast consumers or users. It uses groups of formal and informal channels for its effective reach.
These include:

(a) Economic Interest Groups like cooperative societies, chambers of commerce, market places, trade fairs, etc.

(b) Political Interest Groups: e.g. village/clan/town unions, political parties, ethnic unions, alumni associations etc.

(c) Voluntary Organisations: e.g. Rotary Club, Peoples Club of Nigeria, Lions Club, Lioness, Innerwheel, Zonta International etc.

(d) Educational Institutions: e.g. Schools/colleges/universities, museums, libraries, cultural centres, art galleries, TV Viewing Centres.

(e) Social Clubs: e.g. drinking clubs, fan clubs, television viewers associations, Peoples Club of Nigeria, Island Club and some of the voluntary organisations etc.

(f) Spiritual Groups: e.g. religious groups, churches, mosques, temples, lodges, Idiong Society, Ogboni, Owegbe Cult, Witchcraft societies, shrines, pilgrimmages etc.

(g) Social Class Groups: e.g. men only clubs, women only clubs, age grades, occupational or professional groups (Nigerian Union of Journalists), Nigerian Army Officers Wives Association, Women In Nigeria etc.

(h) Recreational Clubs: e.g. sports clubs, Yoruba Tennis Club, Railway Recreation Club, sports festivals, stadia, Television Viewers Association etc.

(i) Cultural Groups: e.g. masquerades groups, choral groups, Ekpo Society, Oro, Akwaesop Imaisong Ibibio, Marriage Ceremonies, Cultural festivals, travelling theatres etc.

Within each group in the nine categories listed above, members perform their primary functions along with other serious communication functions. Each participant is involved here in a dynamic communication transaction: giving and receiving information, agreeing and disagreeing, pleasing and being pleased. A lot of information which never finds outlet through the conventional traditional and modern communication media is shared through these channels which can only be exploited more effectively for the good of the general society. When viewed thus it is participatory.

Finally, among the characteristics of the traditional communication system is the quality of its ubiquity. The media and messages are available in every society at all times even though they are under-utilised. From the evidence given so far it is clear that traditional media and channels are available everywhere in their different modes too. Some of the common modes which are employed in their various form strictly in their communication functions include the following:

(a) Idiophones: These are self-sounding instruments which may on their own produce their message or are used to produce signals. In this group we have the metal gong, woodblock, wooden drum, bell and rattle.

(b) Membranophones: Sounds or messages are produced through the vibration of the membrane which is beaten or struck with an appropriate stick or beaten by the hand. They come in different shapes and sizes and are also used as musical instruments. The most popular perhaps because of the elegant craftmanship that goes into its production is the Yoruba talking drum. They can beat out messages of their own and produce signals to alert the audience of an impending news, information or announcement.

(c) Aerophones: These are instruments which produce sound as a result of the vibration of a column of air. They include flutes and horns. Some of the most popular include the deer and cow horns, whistles and the elephant tusk or ivory horn.

(d) Symbolography: This is a symbolic writing or representation which may be employed in communicating among members of an exclusive club. The most common is the use of the fresh unopened leaves of the palm frond which can be tied or shaped in different ways to convey different messages.

Wilson (1981: 49–50) has enumerated five different communication contexts in which this particular 'instrument' is used in the Old Calabar Province, while a younger researcher Nsentip Antia (1986) of the University of Cross River State has extended the list to six namely:

(i)   for peace settlement
(ii) for placing injunction on the use of any property,
(iii) for restriction or prohibition in shrines,
(iv) for celebration especially at festivals,
(v)   as notice that a corpse or hearse is approaching
(vi) as warning against certain anti-social activities.

Another important form of symbolography is what is widely known as nsibidi among the Cross River peoples, Igbo, Ejagham, Yakur, Efik/Ibibio and the Camerounians of the border area. This is a cryptic writing used formerly by members of the Ekpe Society only but now used too among designers and wall painters in the Igbo area. :

(e) Signs: These are meaningful marks or objects used to represent something. As constructs by which organisms affect the behaviour or state of another they are associated with specific denotative meanings: Ross (1962 : 165) says that natural signs 'require an interpreter who knows a theory, or general law, in terms of which the sign is an index of the existence of something else'. Thus a system of human communication by gestures or sign language has been developed for the deaf. Different signs with their limited interpretation for different societies exist alongside universal signs like road signs or religious signs.

(f) Objectives: This is a signification in which the object refers to a thing, event or concept. This concrete representation may have a limited sense within the society or may have universal application or significance through its traditional association with specific contexts. At another level it could be viewed as a form of symbolism or sign. The presentation of a bowl or saucer of kolanuts to a visitor has significance in the context of the presentation and also has symbolic meanings. The same goes for the presentation or exchange of charcoal, white pigeon or fowl, white egg, feather, cowries, mimosa, flowers, sculptures, pictures or flags etc.

(g) Colour schemes: This is the use of colours individually or in combination to convey specific messages. Colours have the advantages of pictorial communication by combining the speed of their impact and freedom from linguistic boundaries to achieve instant and effective communication. In spite of a few exceptions there is a general or universal acceptability of the use of certain colours to represent certain ideas and concepts. Some of these colours around which certain general deductions can be made irrespective of one's race are red, black, white, green and blue.

(h) Music: Music as Jacobson (1969: 334) points out is 'an unconsumated symbol which evokes connotation and various articulation, yet is not really defined'. From the inaudible music of the spheres to today's high-fidelity quadrophonic, stereophonic systems, music has played a significant role in ordering, reordering and generally changing human society. Musicologists like Akin Euba (1982) Ekwueme (1983) and

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Sam Akpabot (1981) see it as an instrument of social change. In traditional society grapevine stories are presented in songs by cultural groups and other musical groups. Current events are also presented in their lucid details especially when they concern key members of the society. Such groups may also sing praise songs about successful members of the society. Outdoor performances as well as indoor ones are generally used. Today the phonograph record and cassette tapes have contributed to make music a mass medium of communication, whether in its recorded form or in a live performance.

(i) Extra-mundane communication: This is a mode of communication which is believed to take place between the living and the dead or between man and the supernatural or supreme being. This mode of communication is significant from the point of view that there is no society where it does not exist in its different forms. It usually seems unidirectional in form but a feedback comes through some intrapersonal process. This is done through incantations, spiritual chant, ritual, prayer, sacrifices, invocation, seancs, trance, hysterics or libation. It is a multidemensional mode of communication which has become pervasive in all societies most especially in Africa. It is possible to evoke such intensity of spiritual feeling through a ritual performance that it could lead to a temporary spiritual transmigration of the participants to another world. Such a performance may convey the elements of a cultural celebration, dedication and concecration, as is often witnessed in marriage and funeral rites. Obituary and in memoriam notices in newspapers and magazines are modern forms of this mode of communication.

3. Strategies for Trado-Modern Communication

The present structure and function of both systems do not make for an effective communication enterprise. It is clear from what we have seen so far that the systems can be better organised and restructured to achieve the wishes of the greater society. The need to combine both traditional and modern communication technology for a better and more effective reach has been highlighted by the UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Africa held in July 1980 in which it stated in its recommendation that member states should include in their national communication policies,

measures designed to ensure the greater use of traditional forms of communication for various social, educational and cultural purposes, and their integration with modern communication media, in national development projects.

This recommendation has been further supported by the African Council on Communication Education (A.C.C.E) at its 4th Biennial Conference in Lome, Togo in 1984 where it also recommends a multi-media

approach to the communication problems of Africa and the

exploration into the possibility of mixing traditional and modern media with a view to determining the situations which are supportive of specific types of media combinations.

The A.C.C.E. also states that in the choice of media of communication

The primary considerations . . . should be its appropriateness to the geographical and social environment and its relevance to the overall objectives.

Earlier Wilson (1982) had called for a four-step model of trado-modern mass communication.

The problem now does not seem to be that of working out a model to achieve this but that of creating a standard semantic structure for the description, analysis and conceptualization of the media channels and processes involved in the traditional communication system. This problem is related to another linguistic obstacle which is the absence of an appropriate language which can be universally applied in this description. There is also the problem of mastery of the languages widely used by the masses of people. These related language factors when properly attended to would greatly ease the process of combining the two media systems.

However, a closer study of the two media systems will help in achieving this symbolic relationship. More information is required about the nature, structure and functions of both systems before any particular mode is chosen for a particular communication enterprise.

An example of Wilson's (1982) model of trado-modern communication would make this process clear.
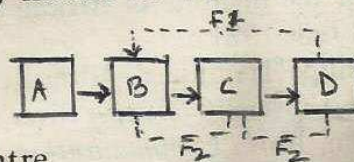

A — Radiomessage

B — Village Communication Centre

C — Traditional communication medium/channel

D — Audience/Receivers

Broken lines represent feedback

The model provides for a certain message source (A) and receivers (D). The village communication centre (B) is both a source and receiver because apart from mediating the message from A it also orginates messages of its own. The traditional medium/channel C is represented by the gongman who then reports A and B to the people (D). In the process C gets feedback from D, B gets from C and A through C gets from B. Sometimes B may get feedback directly from D.

This trado-modern communication model is purely oral in nature. But in the case of combining print with the traditional mode, where some members of the audience are literate, they can receive their information from B where modern media facilities are installed in separate rooms. Here the VCC (B) becomes a kind of media resource centre. If this is tried out, it

seems much of our effort in communicating with the masses of the people will be successful.

4. Conclusion

One of the greatest problems facing society today is the refusal of a significant and very vocal minority occupying strategic positions in government and some of our institutions of higher learning to encourage and support serious academic studies concerning traditional communication systems. From the evidence given above it is clear that the role played by these systems is unassailable and crucial in the process of establishing a kind of new national information and communication order. Thus the need for a closer study and understanding of the traditional system is called for.

Secondly, a closer examination of the strategy for combining traditional and modern communication systems is required to achieve a greater communication enterprise for Nigeria. When these are achieved then it is hoped Nigeria will get into a new era of communication explosion. That is the national communication dream.

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