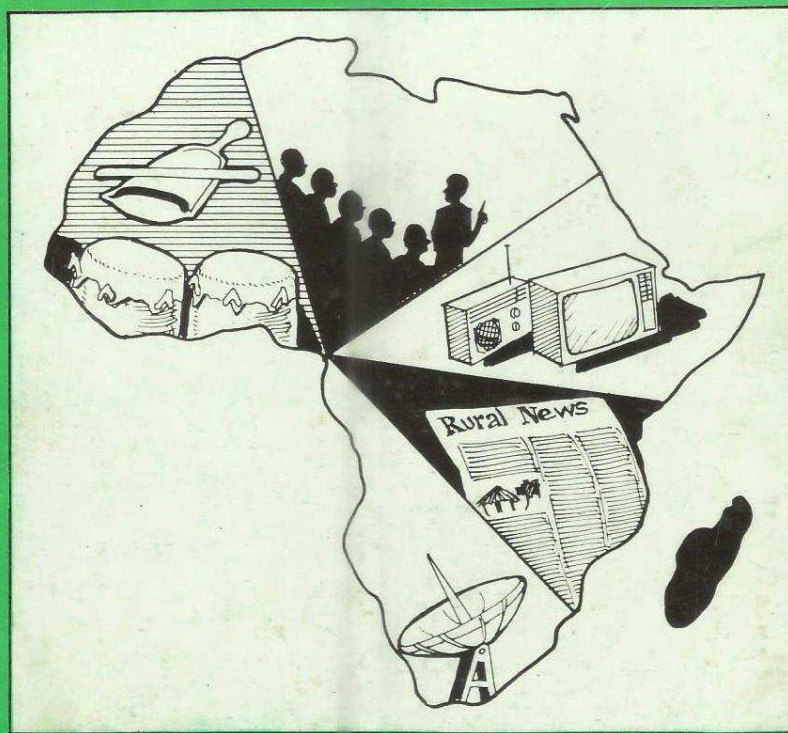


Module on Development Communication 2

Communication Teaching and Study Materials 4



ACCE

Unit 3

Traditional Media in Modern African Development

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Unit Outline

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Introduction: The Traditional and the Modern

There is often a certain degree of semantic and conceptual confusion and misapprehension about what constitutes traditional communication. This arises from the use of "traditional" as a qualifier in discussing communication systems generally. The general notion or implication, also arising from this conclusion and misapprehension, is often that of outdated or perhaps primitive systems of communication which still have surviving relics in most Third World countries. This same view often envisages traditional systems as being mutually antagonistic to what is generally known as modern systems of communication. But the truth is that, although the systems may be old and different in their principles from the new systems introduced from abroad, they remain what essentially sustains the information needs of the rural population which represents over 70 per cent of the national populations of most Third World countries.

The underlying fallacies behind such thinking are based on certain assumptions regarding what is traditional and what is modern. The basic

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assumption here, as Gusfield (1973) has pointed out, is that of seeing existing institutions and values "as impediments to changes and obstacles to modernization" (p. 333). Other related and rather fanciful theories include the view that old traditions are usually displaced by new changes and that traditional and modern forms of a culture are always in conflict. Although scholars on both sides of the opinion divide often sound as if tradition and modernity were mutually exclusive in content, there is very little to bear them out as practical support for such extreme views.

It is important to note that in social contexts, conflicts often arise not necessarily because one form is old and the other new, but because human beings usually resist change of any sort.

The truth is that there will always be social conflicts, irrespective of the chronological age of the concepts involved. It is, therefore, the view of this unit that what constitutes traditional communication is not necessarily a matter of "age", civilization or technology conflicting with change, but rather a system which can be viewed within a communication continuum of the type suggested by Browne and reported by Real (1977).

Browne refers to this continuum as the "cultural lens" where culture is viewed from a focal perspective which delineates four spectrums: folk, elite, popular and mass. Browne's categorization is faulty and restrictive from the point of view of a sense of distance reacted by the 'lens'. It is perhaps more rewarding to view this traditional/modern communication dichotomy from the point of view of a series of concentric circles with the folk (or traditional) communication occupying the innermost circle and mass communication the outermost circle. With this, the limiting sense of distance is replaced by a sense of convergence and sharing of characteristic which is the point of view shared by this unit.

Thus, it is useful to see the system as traditional from the stand-point of an on-going, long-standing and "modernized" (modified) practice. There is also the need to see traditional media systems as those which have defied all efforts by western media to cannibalize them and perhaps supplant them. These traditional systems are also trusted and the majority of the rural people seem

to believe in what comes out of them and usually use them and supplement them with whatever additional information may filter through opinion leaders about events elsewhere. The word "system" is used here to refer to an assemblage of combination of media and channels to form a complex whole: a co-ordinated body of communication methods used within a society. Here the constituent parts have certain attributes which relate them to one another.

The traditional system of communication is a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated by western culture or any other external influence. Traditional system of communication also refers to the mode of control (ownership) and model. It is important to note here that under the traditional system, ownership of the means (media/channels) of communication lies with the society. The village/clan head only acts as a trustee and head of the gatekeeping process.

Taxonomy of Traditional Media Systems

Studies and research into traditional media systems are relatively recent. Earlier mention of these systems was limited in scope and superficial. The most important early study of traditional communication was Pye's (1963) "Models of Traditional, Transitional and Modern Communication System." Subsequent references to this aspect of communication were made by Euro-American scholars like Hachten (1971), Ainslie (1968), Head (1974), Wilcox (1975), and Doob (1966) who, though not deeply interested in the subject except for its anthropological value, nevertheless acknowledged the existence and use of traditional systems in African societies.

Serious academic efforts, though noticeable in undergraduate project reports in, for instance, some Nigerian universities, did not come into the fore until the early 1970s when Ugboajah (1972) began to call attention to these neglected but powerful communication systems. It was not until 1981 when Wilson, working in the Cross River area of Nigeria, approached this field through a systematic study, classification, analysis and understand-

ing of the various media processes and content within the traditional context.

The Theatre Workshop experimentation recommended by experts in Botswana in 1979 and studies by Nwuneli (1981) have also contributed to our knowledge of traditional media. It is becoming clearer to scholars in both the First and the Third Worlds that a good understanding of the structures, patterns, processes and uses of such media could enhance their multiple application for human and national growth and development.

The numerous traditional forms of communication found in Nigeria and most other rural communities in Africa can be broadly divided into 10 classes. These are: (i) idiophones; (ii) membranophones; (iii) aerophones; (iv) symbology; (v) signals; (vi) objectifics; (vii) colour schemes; (viii) music; (ix) extra-mundane communication; and (x) symbolic displays.

Idiophones

These are self-sounding instruments or technical wares 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 we have the gong, woodlock, wooden drum, bell and rattle.

Membranophones

These are media on which sound is produced through the vibration of membranes. They include all varieties of skin or leather drums. These drums are beaten or struck with well-carved sticks. Among the various Nigerian groups, skin drums of various sizes and shapes abound. Perhaps the most popular, because it is the most exposed and intricate in its craftsmanship, is the Yoruba talking drum, locally called *dundun*.

Aerophones

These are media which produce sound as a result of the vibration of a column of air. They comprise media of the flute family, whistle, reed pipes,

horns and trumpets.

Symbology

This simply means symbolic writing or representation. Communication takes place when an encoder uses graphic representations 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.

For example, there are three main kinds of symbology used among the Cross River people (the Efik-Ibibio-Igbo) of Nigeria, namely: (i) the fresh unfolding frond of the palm tree usually with a greenish yellow colour. It is tied and shaped in different ways to convey different meanings; (ii) a decorated stick made from the outer part of the dry branch of the raffia palm tree; and (iii) a kind of cryptic writing used among the Cross River people and in the border areas of Western Cameroon.

Signals

These are the physical embodiments of a message. Many ancient signals are still being used for modern communication today. For example, in Nigeria, there is hardly a broadcasting station which does not utilize drum signals to draw the attention of its listeners to the fact that they are about to begin transmission for the day; deliver their main news broadcast; announce time; close down; or prepare for the broadcast of the local or national leader. Some of the signals include fire, gunshots, canon shots, and drum beats.

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 contextual meanings. These include: kola nut, the young unopened bud of the palm frond, charcoal, white pigeon or fowl, white egg, feather, cowries, mimosa, flowers, sculptures, pictures, drawings and the flag.

Colour Schemes

This is the general conception and use of combination of colours in a design to convey some meanings. Colour uses the advantages of pictorial communication by combining the speed of its impact and freedom from linguistic boundaries to achieve instant and effective communication. Prominent colours used to communicate different meanings among the Cross River people of Nigeria, for example, are red, white, black, green, yellow, brown and turquoise. The combinations of these colours produce certain significant meanings for the society.

Music

Itinerant musical entertainment groups sing satirical songs, praise songs and generally criticize wrong doings of individuals in society. Names of those being satirized or praised may be mentioned or descriptions of their physical or personality attributes given; where they live or what they do, may form part of such songs. Grapevine stories concerning events that are being planned for the society may be featured as a way of alerting the generality of the people. Such groups are potent sources of information.

Extra-mundane Communication

This is the mode of communication between the living and the dead, the supernatural or supreme being. It is usually done through incantation, spiritual chants, rituals, prayers, sacrifice, invocation, seance, trance, hysterics or libation. It is a multi-dimensional communication transaction which has become pervasive in all societies, most especially in Africa. 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 consecration as is often witnessed in marriage and funeral rites. Modern forms of extra-mundane communication are found in obituary and in memorial notices published in newspapers, magazines or on radio and

television.

Symbolic Displays

These may be culture-specific or may have universal significance and some of their characteristics are shared even with primates - e.g. smiling, sticking out the tongue, expression of anger, disgust, happiness, and fear, the way we walk or sit, gestures we use, voice qualities and other facial expressions.

In addition to the forms just discussed, many traditional institutions, clubs or societies are also used for the purpose of disseminating information, passing on gossips, rumours and, at times, highly confidential information. These institutions operate in both urban and rural areas, especially the following: co-operative societies, clan/town/village/family unions, ethnic unions, voluntary organizations, drinking clubs, old students' associations, market women's associations, traders' associations, religious groups, men only and women only clubs, secret societies, cults, sports clubs, recreational clubs, self-help groups, choral groups and many others whose activities are directly linked with communication.

Nature and Content of Traditional Media

Communication processes in rural areas of Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa are in various forms and are geared toward achieving different goals. These can be any of the following: directives; news; advertising; public relations; entertainment; and education.

Directives are given in the form of: (a) announcements concerning public or community work, duties or responsibilities of the collective citizenry which must be carried out or defaulters within the community face certain sanctions; (b) instructions to groups or individuals to carry out certain decisions of the traditional authority; and (c) announcements about forthcoming events.

News is often in the form of information about (a) events which have taken place; (b) deaths, usually of very important citizens and (c) impending events.

Advertising is done through (a) the display of products on a table, tree stump or flag pole; (b) use of peripatetic hawkers and vendors; (c) use of fragrance/odours/aroma to announce the products as is the case in food selling; and (d) singing and drumming of the name of the product to be sold.

Public relations is carried out on (a) person-to-person or person-to-organization basis where the individual tries to promote the image of his organization through praise singing; and (b) performances and announcements made to enhance the image of an organization or group.

Entertainment is perhaps the most pervasive form of traditional media. This is done through music/dance/drama performances put up to be received free or paid for in public or private settings.

Education is carried out most often informally but also formally through (a) cultural groups; (b) membership of certain societies; and (c) other socio-cultural groups.

Functions of Traditional Media

Traditional communication systems are complex and function as part of the larger socio-political organization (a) reporting on and criticizing organs within the system; (b) issuing directives from the legitimate, or in some cases, titular head; (c) providing education in the norms and mores of the society; (d) stimulating the emotions; and (e) generally providing the light to innovations and helping their diffusion. Thus, their functions are more diverse and far-reaching than is often admitted.

The real problem lies in the inability of scholars to detach themselves from western theories, and, in turn, detach traditional media system in a certain sense from the general activities within the society and see it as a unique system which needs greater study and understanding. Nevertheless some key functions and characteristics of the system are discernible:

1. Traditional media can be used to mobilize the people at the grassroots level for community development and national consciousness. No serious mass-oriented development programme, especially in rural communities in Africa, ever succeeds without the active involvement of the practi-

tioners within the traditional system. For example, market women's associations are potent channels for development communication. They mobilize their membership for joint action in community development just as the traditional newsmen uses the gong or wooden drum to stir up citizens for group action. When properly consulted, they can bring about very important social changes through their action. But failure to take them into account would result in the kind of levity that visited a recent coup broadcast in one African country which called on market women to demonstrate in support of the coup attempt.

Much of the failure that attends government mass-oriented programmes are traceable to the fact that policy makers at the national levels fail to utilize this powerful and credible system. It is in recognition of this that, in Nigeria, for example, propagandists for the government programme, Mass Mobilization for Self-Reliance, Economic Recovery and Social Justice (MAMSER), have turned, with some success, to the use of popular entertainers for the purpose of mobilizing citizens.

2. Traditional media also serve as a source of cultural, political, health and other educational and enlightenment programmes for the masses leading them towards self-actualization and national development. Through songs, instructions, theater performances, and general surveillance, traditional media provide education in the norms and mores of the society. Dietz and Olatunji (1965, pp.1-2) captured the essence of traditional African songs when they said of the role of music in child education:

Through singing and clapping he learns about the members of his family and the important people and events of his community, tribe, and country. His mother sings tales of the famous native drummers and dancers who are considered very important people in Africa. By singing songs which contain a moral, his mother teaches him what his people consider to be right or wrong. As he listens to neighbours singing things they dare not say, he learns even more about what his people value. They quarrel, mock and insult each other and later make up, all through songs.

These learning or educational activities may be summarized thus: "in some glorious, auspicious moments, the child gets entertainment; learns his-

tory, genealogy, poetry, about plants and animals, religion and morals, elements of human relations, logic, dance, drama" (Wilson, 1988, p. 280). Fafunwa (1974, p. 15) has said that functionalism was the main guiding principle behind any educational activity since it was seen as a means to an end. He states:

Children learnt by doing...were engaged in participatory education through ceremonies, rituals, imitation, recitation and demonstration. They were involved in practical farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, carving, knitting... Recreational subjects included wrestling, dancing, drumming, acrobatic display, racing, etc., the study of local history, legends, the environment (local geography, plants and animals), poetry, reasoning, riddles, proverbs, story-telling, story-relays, etc. (pp.15-16).

All these were achieved through traditional channels and media of communication and education. In Sierra Leone, the Community Theatre for Education and Development (CTED) is used to attain similar educational goals. According to Mallamah-Thomas (1988), CTED "is organized through participatory research (PR) sessions in village-based theater involving the participants in establishing rapport, mutual understanding and confidence with the villagers, problem identification, data collection and analysis, performance design, drama making, 'swop' performances pre- and post-performance discussions, evaluation and workshop follow-up strategies."

Thus, it is necessary that the educational or cultural transmission function of the traditional channels and media of communication in Africa should be exploited more consistently to eliminate illiteracy and ignorance about African customs and traditions.

3. Traditional media are a source of entertainment through arts and cultural festivals, musicals, and dramatic performances by choral, masquerade, and other music and drama groups. Entertainment also may be in the form of traditional sports with singing and dancing, drama (theatre), hair stylization, modes of dressing, and interpersonal or group activities which stimulate the emotions and the body.

4. Traditional media are used for informational purposes to provide news, announcements, and

to issue directives and reports on the activities of society. This is the system's primary function. Rural people often seek information on how they can improve their situations. The Nigerian Directorate for MAMSER and the Federal Directorate for Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), and the Sierra Leonean CTED have had some success as channels for providing development information to the people.

5. Traditional media are also used for intra-cultural, inter-cultural and other communication purposes leading to group and national unity. For example, yam festivals in various parts of southern Nigeria and other traditional festivals in many other African countries are all large traditional communication set-ups which bring about inter-cultural and even mass communication. Traditional communication gives expression to cultural and other activities of the various parts of a nation. Through festivals, for example, different aspects of a cultural system are exposed to other cultures leading to greater understanding and appreciation of differences. Through this, cross-cultural fertilization takes place and the society and mankind in general become better off.

The above functions are performed through the use of various media and channels available in a society or country. For example, the theatre for development in Sierra Leone, Botswana and Swaziland is a powerful channel for self-actualization, mobilization, education, liberation and development.

The town-crier or town-master is ubiquitous in most African communities. Age-grades, co-operatives and trade associations, cultural organizations, secret societies and recreational clubs are also channels for rural communication and development in Africa. In addition, market places, traders' associations and product guilds also help to transmit and transact communication messages. Among the Ibibio of south-eastern Nigeria, for example, one of the greatest moving forces is the Akwa Esop Imaisong Ibibio, a socio-cultural group with a lot of political influence. When the occasion is right and the message credible, there is no better organ for mobilization in rural/urban areas of Akwa Ibom State than the use of Akwa Esop (the Great Ibibio Patriots' Union).

Problems with Traditional Media

Many problems affect traditional communication media, and, thus retard their growth and consequent use in African countries. 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 traditional communication.

Related to this problem is the absence of an appropriate language which can be universally applied in this description to all similar or identical concepts. This is the problem created by the diversity of languages in Africa, resulting in limited audiences in villages, especially in areas where languages change from one village, clan, town or province to another. Since most African countries have one foreign language or another as a medium of general expression along with hundreds of other indigenous languages, it is difficult to categorize traditional media using universally accepted linguistic codes.

Three options are open to the researcher/scholar, namely: (i) retaining and using indigenous names along with descriptive labels in one of the foreign languages, especially the one spoken in the researcher's country; (ii) using only descriptive labels in the foreign language and standing the risk of being misunderstood; and (iii) inventing or coining alternative words, perhaps based on known models or related media/channels and then validating these coinages at international conferences and through teaching.

Another problem with traditional media is the diversity in the traditional political system in African societies, and the conflict between it and the adopted system which usually requires the use of western media structures, policies and facilities. Political instability, which results from the lack of a long tradition or legitimization of new political processes, has also been the bane of traditional communication. The central authority usually undermines the traditional system. The differences among political systems and orientation of leadership do not provide a favourable environment or climate for growth.

Scientific and technological problems also affect traditional communication. The present

level of development of traditional media in Africa is limited because some of the hardware are not easily preserved, even though they can be replicated. Here is one area where African societies and technologists have not shown enough creativity and inventiveness to develop a dynamic culture. In some cases, no two disparate societies are known to use exactly the same hardware for the dissemination of information on related issues. This results from the lack of scientific and technological knowledge for the improvement and use of traditional communication tools. Thus replicability of messages through traditional media is slower since the system has not been fully developed.

Related to this problem is that of the time-value orientation of most African cultures. Traditional society's technology does not have the capacity to transcend space and other barriers in the same manner as communication satellites and this creates the apparent differences in the time value of information between western and traditional communication systems. This problem raises the need (i) to standardize traditional media instruments, their symbols and meanings, and (ii) to modernize traditional media instruments.

Traditional communication media also suffer from the shortcomings of the socio-economic system. The traditional system is complex and needs to be understood in order for it to be integrated into the modern systems. Such an integration should take the form of synchronization of the two systems without the loss of integrity by either system. Integration could further promote joint editorial meetings under traditional authority when the message is targeted to the rural audience. This is what we refer to as a trado-modern media linkage. However, such a media-mix can only be realized if financial support or sponsorship is given by African governments. Traditional media workers who are seldom paid should be given some remuneration to enhance their performance.

Yet another problem lies in the "teachability" of traditional communication arts, principles and practices. Since the "language" of the subject is not yet standardized, the problem of creating a universal awareness seems to loom large along

side the limitation of opportunities in traditional media practice. In spite of this, it is still possible to teach traditional communication system either independently or as part of a basic systems course in universities as it is done in the Department of Communication Arts, University of Cross River State, Uyo (Nigeria).

Some other problems affecting the growth and use of traditional media system include the authoritarian nature of its mode of operation and the content of its message. The problem of urbanization and noise is another. Some of the facilities of modern living restrict access to traditional media messages. The endless hum of the air-conditioner, the deafening peal of high fidelity music equipment or the sometimes cacophonous blare of vehicular traffic may make the penetration of messages transmitted through traditional media in urban or semi-urban areas impossible.

Finally, there is inadequate information on the operations and functions of all identifiable media and channels usable in traditional societies. Such a situation does not augur well for the growth of the system. Many more studies are needed to identify the uses and gratifications of traditional media and channels.

Conclusion

A lot of work and attention need to be given to the study of traditional communication systems. If African governments are serious about making them to more effectively serve the interests of the central government, then money must be provided for the improvement of traditional media. For example, some special attention must be given to improving the mobility and hardware of the traditional newsman, the "town crier," who is a credible source of information in the rural areas. Efforts at modernization should be made with the custodians of the culture of the society fully involved in all the processes that may lead to some changes. Thus, improvement may be made but the essence of the system that constitutes such a potent force in rural communities should not be destroyed in the process.

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Suggested Exercises

1. Give a taxonomy of the traditional media and channels of communication used in your country. What are the problems the scholar/researcher faces in classifying them?
2. Discuss the major functions of traditional communication. Using some examples from your country, show how these functions are carried out.

3. Various problems seem to beset the traditional system of communication. What, in your view, are these problems and what would you recommend as solutions to them?

4. Examine the nature and content of traditional communication messages. To what extent do they differ from Western practices?

5. "Africa is unique among the various regions of the world in so far as it has the least developed modern communication infrastructures side by side with highly effective interpersonal and traditional information networks which are exclusive to its own genius." Discuss five of the unique traditional modes of communication in your country and give examples of some of the media instruments used for rural communication.

6. Discuss the role of traditional communi-

cation in rural development.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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