

COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

WEEK THREE: Merits and demerits of Traditional Communication

Learning Outcomes



1. classify traditional communication
2. list the channels under each class of traditional communication
3. Analyse classification of communication in Africa according to Des Wilson
4. To discuss the merits and demerit of African Communication Systems
5. To discuss the uniqueness of oramedia

CLASSIFICATION OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

According to Okpoko, Okpoko, and Eyisi (2016), traditional communication is a term that has become synonymous with African means of communication such as African traditional media, communal media, folk media, indigenous media and oramedia. There are varying definitions of traditional communication, just as there are several schools of thought and scholars with idiosyncratic views.

What are a system and the system?

A system is a method or set of methods for doing or organizing something; organization of theories or ideas into a complex whole. It is an assemblage or combination of media and channels to form complex whole: a coordinated body of methods of communication used within a society (Sheila Steinberg p.44). The constituent parts have attributes which relate to one another. The system is the government and state regarded as exploiting, restricting, and repressing individuals or its citizens.

Traditional media systems are considered to:

1. Have defied all efforts by Western media to cannibalize (used as second hand or preyed upon) them and perhaps supplant them
2. Trusted and believed by a majority of people who use the traditional media
3. Supplement information filtered through opinion leaders.

Characteristics of traditional media systems

i) Traditional systems 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 external influences as the case in many parts of the World. The system further more operates in urban centres which have accepted to manipulate western media system for the purpose of enhancing the socio-economic development of these areas.

(Wilson, 1987).

ii) The traditional system refers to the mode of control (ownership) and model. Ownership of the means (media/channels) of communication lies with the society. Hence, for example, the village/ clan head only acts as a trustee and head of the gate keeping (Wilson, 1987)

According to Ogwezzy, A. O., Ajibade, O., Oladokun Omojola, O., Ofulue, C. I., and Onwubere, C. H. (2018), they state that for the purpose of a fair guide, it is necessary to explain meanings of the two words – traditional and channel as used in this text. Traditional as used in this text refers to cultural institutions, ceremonies, events, and arts of African ancestors observed, practised and perpetuated by successors from generation to generations; while Channels are link up ways and means by which ideas, messages information, orders, instructions, secrets and movements are carried out, contacted and contracted .

So, traditional channels of communication are numerous as some of them tend to serve specific or secret purposes and others serve the interests of all in general. Though some appear to be obsolete, their uses still linger on today in rural societies (Ogwezzy et al, 2018). They are commonly used to advise, inform, warn, encourage, and incite people on what, how, when and where to act. They are of different types. Akpan (1977) mentioned bells, canon shots, drums, arti-factual communication, folksongs and proverbs, which made him conclude that traditional media are more visual than audio. Again, Modum (1980) mentioned music and rituals as media of communication in indigenous Nigeria. Another scholar, Ugboajah (1979) also noted that traditional societies of Nigeria communicate more of informal than formal mechanism. He cited songs, dances, symbols, cult scripts, iconography, linguistic and market place dialogue as channels. Another similar but more encompassing view is that the informal channels are rooted in the people's governments, social structures, titles and secret societies, marriage structures,

cultures and in their laws and customs. Ugboajah (1979:43) asserted, “the most significant thing about Africa’s traditional communication is that the audience has learnt to attach great significance to it. Local media are also said to have force and credibility and that puts stability into the African indigenous institutions”. An attempt has been made below to classify them. What are these modes of communication in Africa? How are they classified? How do they work? What are their functions?

In Africa just like in other parts of the world, communication may occur without any conscious or deliberate attempt by an information sender. Communication occurs in different forms – verbal or non-verbal; oral or written; formal or informal; and intentional or unintentional. They are all interactive and do not exist in isolation of one another. For instance, observers might infer much from others’ actions, dress, physical appearance and body language (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

Again, the bulk of childhood learning consists of imitation. Animals, plants and inanimate objects such as stars and clouds convey much information to those able to interpret them. So, the receiver must decode the incoming information against the backdrop of his/her culture and match it with existing knowledge. Hence, culture and existing knowledge have impact on encoding, decoding and matching processes, which could produce noise in the communication channel and results in no two people with a very few exceptions having exactly the same knowledge about anything (Ogwezzy et al, 2018). This explains why there are problems in neatly defining and classifying African communication systems. Essentially, gradations, overlaps and exceptions abound. According to Ibagere (1994:81), “There has often been some confusion regarding what actually constitutes African traditional media (or, rather, African traditional modes of communication.” It should also be noted that changes in technology and organisation make it difficult to draw a firm line separating indigenous from non-indigenous or exogenous communication ... system which existed [in Africa] before the arrival of mass media and formally organised bureaucratic system (Wang 1982:3) cited in (Wang and Dissanayake, 1984).

Furthermore, a Nigerian communication scholar, Nwuneli (1983) asserted that the traditional channels of communication in the rural areas of Nigeria (and other parts of Africa) are well organised and purpose oriented. In addition to these, differentiation could be made between the process of information dissemination and the channels through which information are disseminated in the rural communities of Nigeria (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

According to (Ogwezzy et al, (2018), the agencies of public communication may be conveniently classified into two groups – the oral communication or informal transference media and the organised communication or formal transference media. The media in the first operated through informal contacts between individuals and persons and essentially did not go beyond the circulation or dissemination of rumours and unofficial information...the second category ... was concerned with the more systematised dissemination of information not between persons but between the government and the people ...the tools employed were recognised officials and recognisable sounds, signs and symbols

Buttressing the classification of Omu (1978), Wilson and Unoh (1991) cited in Ogwezzy et al, (2018). stated that in looking at the roles oral forms of communication play in the indigenous communication network, it is easy to infer that among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, communication was more informal than the formal mechanism.

In his study, another Nigerian scholar Oreh (1980) cited in Ogwezzy et al, (2018), divided local media into several categories – interpersonal, face-to-face type of communication; a broader level inter-group communication and communication at the mass level. He said verbal or non-verbal communication would be used in each of the communication levels depending on the type, which ensures message fidelity. So, some of the types are verbal or oral and the channel is speech which is the use of human mouths including all sounds made with the human mouth that involves the use of spoken word; and non-verbal that uses body language as channels.

According to (Ogwezzy et al, 2018). Similarly, another Nigerian scholar, examining the different methods in which communication is most notably carried out in the African traditional social system, noted that communication modes are determined by the biological senses of man, and employed in view of the face-to-face relationship, they are, therefore classified into three main groups, the verbal mode, the non-verbal mode, and esoteric mode (Ibagere, 1994:83)

Verbal mode according to Ibagere (1994) cited in Ogwezzy et al, (2018), includes spoken language; songs; and poetry, chants and incantations. The non-verbal mode, includes body language; symbology; dance; music including its hardwares (idiophone, membranophone, chordophone, aerophone, and xylophone). Finally, the esoteric mode incorporates all other modes. They include dreams; divination and telepathy.

Another Nigerian scholar, Wilson (1998) cited in Ogwezzy et al, (2018). cited in) based on his observation in two Nigerian States – Akwa-Ibom and Cross River came up with classes which he opined, that others scholars can contest, but stressed that they provide insights and approximation on the subject. He did not agree with Doob (1966), Oreh (1980), or Ibagere (1994), but attempted grouping into classes the various modes of communication observed in the aforementioned States. He identified six classes – Instrumental, Demonstrative, Iconographic; Extra-Mundane; Visual, and Institutional. Below in Table 1, is a graphic representation adapted from Wilson (1998:27), but slightly modified with the heading – classes, hardware and channels/instruments adapted from Ibagere (1994) classification.

Table 1

Classes	Hardware	Channels/Instruments
A. Instrumental	Idiophones	Wooden drum, Woodblock ritual rattle, Bell, Metal gong, Akankang, Ekere, Xylophone, Hand Shakers, Pot drum
	Membraneophones	Skin drum
	Aerophones	Whistle, Deer horn, Ivory tusk, Reed pipe
	Symbolography	Decorated bamboo rino, Nsibidi, Tattoo, Chalk marks
B. Demonstrative	Music	Songs, Choral and Entertainment Music
	Signal	Cannon shots, gun shots, Whistle call, Camp fire
C. Iconographic	Objectified	Charcoal, White dove, Kolanut, Cow tail, White clay, Egg, Feather, Calabash, Beads, Limb bones, Drinking gourds, Flag
	Floral	Young unopened palm frond, Okon tree, Nsei, Nyama, Mimosa, Palm stems
D. Extra-Mundane	Incantatory	Ritual, Libation, Vision
	Graphic	Obituary, in memoriam notices
E. Visual	Colour	White cloth, Red cloth, Black cloth
	Appearance	Dressing, Hairstyle
F. Institutional	Social	Marriage, Chieftaincy
	Spiritual	Shrine, Masquerade

Source: Wilson, D. (1998) “A Taxonomy of Traditional Media in Africa” in Ansu-Kyeremeh Kwasi.

Note: The first row (classes, hardware and channels/instruments) is this writer’s idea.

Furthermore, a Ghanaian scholar, Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998: 185-187) cited in Ogwezzy et al, (2018), in looking at intra-village patterns of communication said that it involves venue-oriented communication; events as communication modes; games as communication; and performance-oriented communication.

A Nigerian scholar, Akpabio (2003) cited in Ogwezzy et al, (2018), synthesising the classification of Doob (1966), Wilson (1998) and Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998) came up with ten classes.

1. Instrumental communication
2. Demonstrative communication
3. Iconographic communication
4. Extra-mundane communication
5. Visual communication
6. Institutional communication
7. Venue-oriented communication, structure and features
8. Myths and legends
9. Names as communication
10. Folktales and proverbs

He credited Wilson (1998) with the first six categories; accommodates the thinking of Doob (1966) and Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998) in the seventh category; and added the last three.

This author wrapping up the classification of these scholars - Doob (1966); (1980); Ibagere (1994); Wilson (1998); Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998); and Akpabio (2003) in this area of communication, would adopt Akpabio (2003) classification with slight modifications to folktales and proverbs as a category and include two more classes - verbal and non-verbal based on Ibagere (1994) but retaining only those channels in the verbal and non-verbal class that Akpabio (2003) did not include in other modes under his classification i.e. spoken and body language.

Also Ibagere (1994) esoteric modes would be discussed under Akpabio (2003) Extra-mundane mode. This author also adds natural phenomena based on her observation as a class of African communication modes.

So her classification is as follows:

- i. Verbal (spoken language) and non-verbal (body language) communication
- ii. Visual channels
- iii. Iconographic channels
- iv. Instrumental channels
- v. Demonstrative channels
- vi. Extramundane channels
- vii. Institutional channels
- viii. Venue-oriented channels
- ix. Myths and legends
- x. Names as communication
- xi. Folktales, proverbs, and parables
- xii. Natural phenomena

Categories of traditional media systems by Des Wilson.

There are numerous traditional forms of communication Africa. They can be broadly divided into sixteen classes or more, namely:

(i) 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, wood jock, wooden drum, bell and rattle. (Des Wilson,1987)

(ii) Membranophones: These are media on which sound is produced through the vibration of membranes. They include all varieties of skin or leather drum. 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. (Des Wilson,1987)

(iii) 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. (Des Wilson,1987)

(iv) Symbolography: This simply means symbol 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. (Des Wilson,1987)

(v) 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 or announce time, close down or prepare for the broadcast of the local or national leader. Some of the signals include fire, gunshots, canon shots, drum (wooden or skin). (Des Wilson,1987)

(vi) Signs: Marks, which are meaningful, or objects or symbols used to represent something are signs. It is a construct by which organisms affect the behaviour or state of another in a communication context Sign language (i.e. a system of human communication by gestures) has been developed for the deaf while signs are more likely to be symbolic in certain contexts. Symbols are not signs. Signs are associated with specific denotative meanings while symbols usually carry along with them connotative meanings as well. (Des Wilson,1987)

(vii) Objectifies: 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. This Include: kola nut, the young unopened bud of the palm frond, charcoal, White Pigeon or fowl, white egg, feather, cowries, mimosa. Flowers, sculptures, pictures, drawing, the flag etc. (Des Wilson,1987)

(viii) 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. Among the prominent colours used to communicate different meanings among the Cross River people are: red, white black. green. yellow, brown and turquoise. Combinations of these colours produce certain significant meanings for the society. Since colours play an important role in modern advertising, greater attention will continue to be given to them in the fields of science, industries, advertising, public relations and social communication. (Des Wilson, 1987)

(ix) 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, where they live, or what they do may form part of such songs. (Des Wilson,1987)

(x) Extramundane communication: This is the mode of communication between the living and the dead, the supernatural or Supreme Being. This is usually done through Incantation, spiritual chants, ritual, prayers, sacrifice, Invocation, séance, trance, hysterics or liberation. This is a multi-dimensional communication transaction, which has become more 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. (Des Wilson,1987)

(xi) Symbolic displays or non verbal communication: These would be cultural-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. (Des Wilson,1987)

(xii) Clubs or societies are also used for the purpose of disseminating-Information, passing on gossips, rumors and at times highly confidential information. These Institutions operate in both urban and rural areas. But most prominently some of them are found in urban and rural areas

especially the following: cooperative societies, clan/town/village/family unions, ethnic unions, and 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, age traders, choral groups, self-help group, occupational groups and many others which may fall within any 'one or more of the groups listed and whose objectives may not be for communication purposes but whose activities are directly linked with communication. (Des Wilson,1987)

(xiii) Traditional emissary whose function was a message carrier, messenger or newsman, is equivalent to today's news reporters, correspondents, news agents, messengers, spokesmen/women, envoys (ambassador) etc. (Des Wilson,1987)

(xiii) Community drama or dramaturgical performance is referred by Goffman as way participants use to produce, sustain and safeguard their social roleplay. A reference which Goffman argues has to do with the way people maintain their behaviour in real life or stage actors (Goffman E. 1975). In Africa closely connected to drama are songs and the dances used during the performance. Drama or plays (comedy, stage, satire, etc) in Africa is based on legends, myths, poetry, past or present events, for example, the play Lwanda Magere that supposes the tribal cross the border war between Luos and Kalenjins in Kenya. Drama was meant to communicate entertainment, moral values of the community or address a social lesson. Currently, for example in Nyanza, Kenya it is used the social concern: Aids.

(xiv) Story telling among the Africans. One thing to bear in mind is that in many old traditions storytelling is synonymous with song, chant, music, or epic poetry, especially in the bardic traditions. Stories may be chanted or sung, along with musical accompaniment on a certain instrument. Therefore some who would be called folk musicians by foreign music enthusiasts are just as accurately called storytellers - their true roles are more profound, as their names reflect: bards, ashiks, jyrau, griots amongst many more. Their roles in fact are often as much spiritual teachers and exemplars, or healers, for which the stories and music are vehicles, as well as historians and tradition-bearers. For instance bakhshi, the term for bard used in central Asia, means a shaman / healer who uses music as a conduit to the world of the Spirit.

(xv) Myths among the Africans: Myths (sacred history narrative) and legends (verbal art or narrative explaining the origin of a people) developed over thousands of years in Africa south of the Sahara. Among the influences on their development were the mass migrations that took place from time to time. About 7,000 years ago, the ancestors of the Hottentot and the Bushmen began moving from the Sahara toward southern Africa. Five thousand years later, people who spoke Bantu languages began spreading out from Cameroon, on Africa's west coast, until they eventually inhabited much of sub-Saharan Africa. Such migrations caused myths and legends to spread from group to group and led to a mixing of myths and legends. The migrations also gave rise to new stories about events in the history of those peoples. For instance, as Bantu groups settled in new homelands, they developed legends to explain the origins of their ruling families and the structure of their societies.

xvi) Proverbs, Sayings and Riddles: What is Proverb? Proverb can be defined as a short, generally known sentence of the folk, which contains wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. Among the Africans, proverbs are common ways of expressing religious ideas and feelings. It is in proverbs they find the remains of the oldest forms of African religions and philosophical wisdom.

MERITS OF AFRICAN COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

According to Olulade (1998) cited in Wefwafwa (2014), below is some of the merits of African communication systems:

- It is understood by members of a community
- It readily appeals and connects with the people's language, culture, belief, myth, legend and customs which enhances effectiveness of communication (relates to values, norms, ethos and culture of Africans)
- Uses symbols, values and indigenous institutions, which enhance messages' effectiveness
- Projects African historical past (traditions)

- Derived from the culture, beliefs, and the way of life of Africans
- Rooted among the local people and respected by the people, especially the ruralites
- Embedded in the culture of the people, which is the driving force
- Relies on indigenous technology, employs values and symbols that the people identify with.

Uniqueness of Oramedia in Modern Age

It is important to explore the uniqueness of oramedia in the contemporary world. According to Osho (2011), they include the following:

1. **Traditional:** Oramedia are traditional means of communication in Africa as they are transmitted from one generation to the other. People grew up with them, and they get accustomed to them in their day-to-day interactions. So, they are bound to be with the people till eternity. When you seek to separate a people from the oramedia, you are attempting to exterminate them from the faces of the earth.
2. **Language:** Oramedia are both verbal and non-verbal means of communication which make them more appealing, effective, and understandable.
3. **Alternative Media:** The indigenous media in Africa serves as alternative media in the modern age because for messages to properly get to the grass root, the people must be linked up through the oramedia. Hence, traditional rulers across Africa even in big cities like Lagos, Cairo, Cape Town, Nairobi, Abeokuta and others still use the Town Criers to announce festivals, restrictions, and traditional ceremonies. This is being done in the face of the mass media and the new media that are still elitist among the few. It is oramedia that reinforces the information they get from the mass media because the market women and others have the opportunity of asking questions directly from the representatives of the traditional ruler, the Town Crier who brought the message. Indeed, the ‘medium is the message’. (McLuhan, 1964).
4. **Culture:** The oramedia are derived from the culture and way of life of the people. Hence, it is enduring and effective.

5. **Less Expensive:** The traditional media is less expensive, as it costs less to send messages and to receive. It contradicts the new media and the mass media that takes toll on your lean purse every second. The more you are on your laptop, hardtop, or handset communicating online or talking, the more you are paying for the service. It is not so with oramedia.
6. **Uses Indigenous technology:** The folk media uses indigenous technology which can be improved upon by our Engineers and Traditional experts in the transmission and reception of information which are peculiar to the way of life of the people.
7. **Communal:** The oramedia are communal in nature because they are used within the confines and understanding of a particular people, tribe or ethnic.
8. **Credible:** The people believe in the messages of the traditional media more than the exogenous media or the new media.
9. **Easy Understanding:** The messages that are being transmitted through the traditional media are easy to understood, and does not require the interpretation of anybody. It is transmitted in the language and culture that are traditional to the people.
10. **Simplicity:** The oramedia are simple and less sophisticated to apply. A lot of elite still don't know how to manipulate many things in their handsets and laptops after many years.
11. **Opinion Leadership:** The people of Africa believe strongly in their Opinion Leaders and whatever information they get from them. They include the traditional rulers, traditional Chiefs, market leaders, Aides of traditional rulers, and heads of families, and religious leaders. The people believe that these leaders cannot mislead them because they are in position to serve them.

DEMERITS AND CHALLENGES OF THE COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

Challenges of African Communication

The African communication system is faced with some challenges in the contemporary world. According to Osho (2011), these include:

- i. **Extinction of African Languages:** A lot of African languages are going into extinction because of the adoption of the language of colonial masters as official

language. Nigeria adopts English as the official language as part of the colonial heritage. This threatens the over 250 languages being spoken in the 200 million population country. Once the language of a people is taken, the whole of its culture is eroded.

- ii. The manifestation of the ‘Global Village’ theory of Marshall McLuhan is a challenge to oramedia. We now have the new communication culture of electronic age that perhaps enslaves man on the websites and internet.
- iii. The erosion of the cultural technology in preference for new technologies constitutes threats to oramedia.
- iv. The reliance of oramedia in the opinion leaders is a challenge as the new sets of opinion leaders in Africa are selfish, self-centred, and protégés of the West that continues to undermine African culture. The new opinion leaders are now partisan, and now colour and distort information to the people through the folk media.
- v. The social system in the African family set up, community and institutions are greatly affected by the dominant Western culture which threatens oramedia. The African children now lack the home training, and the understanding of the African languages to the understanding of the oramedia messages.
- vi. The erosion of African value system in various homes in Africa also threatens the folk media.
- vii. The domineering nature and indeed the ubiquitous nature of the mass media and the new media threaten the indigenous communication system in Africa.
- viii. The lack of understanding of African body language, paralanguage and other non-verbal codes by the new generation of African children, constitute threat to oramedia.
- ix. Lack of pride in African tradition and values among the new generation of African children is a challenge the African communication system.
- x. Urbanisation constitutes threat to oramedia through the expansion of African villages and towns into cities, as it destroys the communal way of living of the people that gives fillip to folk media.

- xi. The problems of illiteracy, poverty, ill-health, lack of social amenities, and population explosion constitutes threat to oramedia in African countries. This is because, knowledge is power, and health is wealth.

Summary



Traditional systems 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 external influences as the case in many parts of the World. The system further more operates in urban centres which have accepted to manipulate western media system for the purpose of enhancing the socio-economic development of these areas. The traditional system refers to the mode of control (ownership) and model. Ownership of the means (media/channels) of communication lies with the society. Hence, for example, the village/ clan head only acts as a trustee and head of the gate keeping. From the notes discussion, it is obvious that no classification is right or wrong. As far as there are many scholars of African communication, their cultures, observations, and experiences would impact on their classification; and so there would be sundry classifications of African communication modes. However, this does not discount the fact that the classification attempt made by this author would enhance our understanding of the traditional modes of communication in Africa. The merits of African communication systems are like, it is understood by members of a community; It readily appeals and connects with the people's language, culture, belief, myth, legend and customs which enhances effectiveness of communication (relates to values, norms, ethos and culture of Africans. The African communication system is faced with some challenges in the contemporary world.

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