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HARNESSING INDIGENOUS MEDIA FOR ENHANCED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATION

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Abstract

The paper expresses concern over attempts by the Western World, typified by Western Europe and North America to undermine indigenous media system. This tendency to view African media of communication with disdain has the propensity to erode our dignity and pride of our very existence as a people. It stresses the crucial role played by this system of communication which has sustained the African communal living from time immemorial. Indigenous media is seen as the pivot around which the development aspirations of the people are realised. Challenges confronting the unorthodox media system are highlighted and recommendations made to the effect that a convenient marriage between the two major systems - indigenous and modern should be encouraged for the overall benefit of the people.

Introduction

There hasbeen a raging controversy as to what should rightly be termed, traditional media. The western world typified by the United States of America and Western Europe have made tedious efforts to undermine what is traditionally termed traditional media by contending that traditional media rightly reflects the modem mass media: newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television and motion pictures etc. In their philosophical conception, what is generally understood as modern mass media refers to the new media or social media while traditional media aptly refers to the print media and electronic media. The thinking of the Western World should not be allowed to permeate the minds of communication scholars and students of African origin so that they will not be misled into thinking that indigenous media of communication can not favourably compete with the modem mass media in information dissemination and other communication concerns. This spurious and misleading attempt is a deliberate effort to undermine the integrity and legitimacy of African media system which has sustained the Africans from time immemorial. This is because indigenous means of communication preceded the modern mass media and the system has sustained the African people from time immemorial. There has never been a time in the history of mankind where human existence has thrived without communication encounter between and amongst themselves. This is because communication is an ingredient for survival and without it, life is not complete.

Communication has often served the needs of people at different stage of development and depending on the values, norms and beliefs and state of development of society, different communication media or means were employed to satisfy the information, entertainment and cultural needs of the society in question. As Dominick (1990:3 1) puts it:

> For a society to exist, certain communication needs must be met. Theseneeds existed long before Gutenberg bolted together his printingprocess:..Council of elders interpreted facts and made decisions to the rest of the group other members of the tribe may have been story tellers and jesters who function to entertain the group.

Gradually as society became more and more sophisticated, it became necessary to device means and ways of meeting the communication challenges. Dominick further explains.

> As society became larger and more complex, these jobs grew too big to be handled by single individuals. With the advent of Technology thatallowed the development of mass communication, these jobs were takenover by the mass media.

Perhaps, the Western World is oblivious of the rapid technological development whichhas blinded them to the reality that primitive societies cannot discard what is their ownand the fact that urban centres in Africa still see the need to employ indigenous media inthe political, economic and cultural lives in their day-to-day co-existence.

It is pertinent to appreciate that the communication functions at the later stage of development were rather complemented, and supplemented by the modern mass media and not supplanted, displaced or surpassed by the modem mass media. Africa indigenous media system will continue to play crucial and supportive role even when modem mass communication media are mainly used.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Indigenous media

Indigenous media, most often called folk media or oramedia are based on indigenousculture produced and consumed by members of a group. Wilson (1997:60) contends that:

> Oramedia is the concept which describes traditional or indigenous media of communication in Africa. It is a multi-channel communication system -which is employed in most rural areas (villages, clans, towns, wards) as well as in rural - urban settings... this process is also referred to as traditional communication.

It is obvious as indicated by Wilson (1997) that the use of traditional media transcendsthe rural setting. They have been found to be useful even in urban-settings and are beingput into relevant use by those who appreciate their pervasiveness.Nwosu (1990:27) cite Jefkins and Ugboajah as stressing the need to developNigerian's traditional communication modes and defines indigenous media against thebackdrop of contradictory perspectives as:

> The products of the interplay between a traditional community's customs and conflicts, harmony and strife, cultural convergences and divergences, culture - specific tangibles and intangibles, interpersonal relations, symbols and codes and oral traditions-of-masquerades, witchcraft, rites, rituals, music, dance, drama, customs and peoples factual existence from birth to death.

From the foregoing, it can be said that indigenous media system is an all-embracingconcept which incorporates the entire existence of the people. This explains the fact thatindigenous communication cannot be isolated from social conventions and practices ofthe people. Wilson (1990:280) shares a similar view with Jefkins and Ugboajah (1986)when he states that:

> What constitutes traditional communication is today a hybridfrom other fields of study, namely, anthropology, history, sociology, linguistics, music, religion, mythology, and an amalgam of multi-cultural practices, which have become standard...

It is obvious that indigenous media is not only one system but a network of mediasystem which operates at various levels of society. One of the most significant facts about oramedia is the significance attached to them by the village or rural audience. Indigenous media are perceived by the audience as having force or credibility and prestige. They are equally seen as injecting stability into Africa social systems and indigenous institutions.

Indigenous media are the methods which have been used for centuries in rural areas. In some primitive societies, they may be the only means of communication known to the people.In the words of Wilson (1999) oramedia or traditional media are the local means of communication that remain what essentially sustain the information needs of the population which represents over 70 percent of the national population in the rural areas. Indigenous media represent the culture and tradition of the people. It is in the right of this that even the UNESCO. Commission on communication recognizes the age-long introduction of indigenous media and their relevance in contemporary world. According to MacBride et al (1981:47), traditional media or oramedia are body languages and other non-verbal languages being used in the traditional societies for millennia for a variety of purposes.

Community Development

The concept of community development is not new. It predates the twentieth century and can be traced to the efforts of many missionaries overseas during several centuries with respect to Tropical Africa, Ekong (1988:370) reports that:

> The idea of community development was first conceived by the colonial office in Britain in 1920s as a special development; modelfor the rural areas of its dependent territories. Its aim... was tocompensatefor the shortcoming of the conventional schools system in the former British dependent territories and to serve as a vehicle for progressive evolution of the people to self-government in the context of social and economic change.

From the foregoing it can be said that the colonial administration's original conception of community development was in terms of mass education. It was in this light that community development centres were set up in some of the colonies where skills in house building, carpentry, shoe repairing and various handicrafts were taught. Ekong (1988), reports that it was in Ghana that a national organization for community development and social welfare was first fully developed. Ekong also cites Milburn (1954) that the British colonial masters saw community development as a way of getting backward people in the right frame of mind for doing things.

As time progressed, a somewhat different attitude was developed about community development. In 1945, the Cambridge conference on social development therefore redefined the concept as a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and on the initiative of the community.

In 1948, the Cambridge summer conference on African Administration sponsored by the colonial office, further defined community development as 'a movement to promote better living for the whole

community with the active participation and if possible on the initiative of the community, but if this initiative is not forthcoming spontaneously by the use of techniques for arousing and stimulating it in order to secure its active and enthusiastic response to the movement.

As the term community development gained international recognition, the United Nations in 1956 adopted an all-embracing definition. It held that community development is the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural condition of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation and to enable them contribute fully to national progress. Two essential ingredients can be deduced from this definition: the participation by the people themselves in efforts to improve their living with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative, self-help and mutual help and make these more effective.

Development

Development refers to economic well-being, the improvements of the well-being of the individual and the betterment of the quality of his or her life. Development is a multi-faceted phenomenon which means many things to many people and different things to different people. Development at the individual level aims at improved skills and capacity, greater freedom and self-actualization of human potentials.

Indigenous Media Channels in Africa

There seems to be no unanimity of opinion about classification of indigenous media.An attempt to classify indigenous media may not yield any concrete and precise agreements.

Based on the general overview of the different indigenous modes as identified by communication scholars it is however, possible to identify the following specific modes as they exist in different African rural settings.

Folk media: This can be used to communicate some interesting public relations messages to rural people. Some of these messages are useful especially when there are local tribes or mixed ethnic groups with different languages and dialects. These people may live in remote places far beyond the reach of the mass media. The puppet show which is anaspect of folk media is a medium used in many parts of Africa and Asia, and the message A is communicated by a playlet acted out and mimed by puppets. The message can be converted into any language as there is no spoken word. However, language can be used in the village theatre where the public relations message can be presented in the form of a short play.

Gossip: Another interesting form of folk media is gossip. In many non-western societies,gossip is important where people congregate. It may be gossip that take place in marketsquares andbazaars where people meet regularly, or which occurs in restaurants or when friends gather at home. News can travel fast using gossip. This situation is common to Africa, India and China where gossip flourishes.

Music: Music pervades all activities of the African societies. It encompasses the people's history, its value is in the knowledge of social custom; it involves participation, it is spiritual and economic because it involves participation, it is spiritual and economic because it demonstrates the non-material in the material; it is a healer and counsellor because of its therapeutic powers; it is a source of change from within because it is a meeting of traditionalvalues and factors of change. Music symbolises artistic experience, creativity, expression,spiritualism and function.

Like mass communication music can inform, educate and entertain. It can satire, extol,praise good deeds etc. During group work, music can encourage or motivate people.

Drum: The drum is another indigenous communication medium.It serves an important oramedia function in African context. The pitch and the tune of the drum can communicate special messages. Drums are usually employed on special occasions like ceremonies and festivals.

Linguists: The linguists can also transmit developmental communication messages. The linguists of rural Africa are expert disseminators and interpreters of messages. The linguists who sometimes serve as messengers are taught secret musical notes in order to establish their identity and authenticity of the written notes.

Market places: Market places apart from serving as business and commercial centres also serve as communication forums. Market places are diffusion forums of social interactions and exchange. They can be gainfully utilized for the diffusion of developmental communication message. According to Jefkins and Ugboajah (1986), the market place remains effective because of the tremendous amount of interaction it generates. It serves various purposes to the village -economics, social, political, cultural, religious and psychological spheres. As news centre, the market place attract personal as well as public information on subjects such as public affairs, family affairs, educational matters and religious concerns mostly at rural and village level. It should be noted that communication in this oramedia sector goes on in both verbal and nonverbal forms but mostly symbolically. Market place association serves as sub-forums for economic cooperation and social communication.

Festivals: Festivals as oramedia are reminders of the past, and therefore serve historical and solidarity purposes. Festivals can therefore be gainfully employed to disseminate messages designed for community development.

Chiefs/Elders: Traditional chiefs who exercise enormous powers are responsible for theenforcement of laws. They are regarded as the custodians of traditions of the people andsymbols of governmental authorities and play a crucial role in the enforcement ofcommunication decisions. Besides the traditional chief, the elders also play important role in the traditional African society. The traditional political leadership is by gerontocracy, i.e. government by the aged. The administration of justice in the traditional society was carried out by the chiefs and elders whose wisdom was highly esteemed. The elders are perceived as embodiments of wisdom, fairness, legend, history and tradition who were in constant communication with the ancestors. They were revered and decisions made by them were regarded as the pronouncement of the oracles. The old men who represented the various extended family circles constituted a council of elders. The council of elders together with the council of chiefs constituted the village council. These bodies carried out both adjudication and communication function for the overall development of the community.

Chief priests: The traditional chief priest also constitutes a veritable communication medium in the Africa setting. Each chief priest heads the extended family shrine. The chief was usually the oldest man in each extended family unit. He performs sacrifices to the ancestor to appease them. It was believed that sickness, accidents, upheavals misfortunes, disasters and mysterious deaths are caused by or attributed to ancestors who were wronged or aggrieved. This belief system was crucial for the interpretation of many phenomena in the society. So communication in the African environments goes beyond verbal face-to-face exchange. The duties of the traditional chief priest include adjudication in domestic matters affecting wives, siblings and household members, whereas the functions of the village council include the maintenance of law and order, road maintenance and general welfare. The head of the extended family was also subordinate to the village council which handles serious matters affecting the lineage. The collection of taxes could also be carried out by the village head that is regarded as government representative. He could appoint his protégé or agent to perform the duty on his behalf.

Age-Grades: The age grades constitute a veritable political and communication structure in the African rural communities. Quite apart, serving as a proper organ of socialization into a matured and recognized society, it also contributes to political stability, social cohesion and moral soundness of the society by ensuring that its laws and sanctions were observed. Quite apart from being responsible for the maintenance of public roads, works, cleaning sources of drinking water and providing communal labour, the age grades areveritable channels through mobilization and dissemination of development messages.

Village meetings: Village meetings are essentially used inthe traditionalsetting to mobilize the community toward development activities. This medium offers opportunity to discuss problems and introduce new ideas. Meetings of this nature when planned in advance with the local leaders involved will lead to the formation of various groups. All shades of opinion is usually represented in village meetings because it is a congregation of the entire community irrespective of age, sex, educational and socio-political status. Meetings of this nature take place in the village square (the equivalent of today's town halls) or any central arena of the community where crucial decisions that affect the lives of the

community are made. Apart from such forums serving economic functions, they were channels for mobilizing the people toward developmental aspirations of the people.

Town-criers: The town-crier is variously called - the village gong-man, the village announcer or even the chief's messenger or palace liaison officer. The town-crier is one of the most pervasive of the indigenous channels in the African traditional setting. He occupies a uniqueposition and he is readily accessible to the village chief for routine information diffusion and exigency situations. The town-crier provides a channel by which the views of the people may be expressed providing immediate feedback mechanism. Wilson (1997) tags him as the official press because of his crucial role in information dissemination. The role of the town-crier in information dissemination is akin to a radio broadcaster or announcer who carries out major announcements on issues that are crucial to the heart of the community. There is hardly any community development project that does not have the footprint of the town-crier in one way or the other.

The major limitation of the towncrier is that his raw voice is not mediated by electrical or technical means and this makes it impossible for the message to be amplified over a long distance. Another problem with the town-crier is that he lacks the basic skill in the act of logical presentation of information. Because he is sometimes drunk and works under the influence of alcohol, the audience tends to view him with disdain.

Visits: Paying visits is part and parcel of African tradition. Because of social solidarity and good neighbourliness, visits are highly appreciated. Visits are used to identify with one another in both times of joy and sorrow. A great deal of conversation and interaction usually occur during such visits. Such conversation and interaction may border on a wide range of issues that affect the lives of the community. The information could be health, political or any socio-cultural matters. Visits create opportunity for a wide range of information sharing and exchange of ideas. They are used to foster and consolidate relationships between friends which create conducive atmosphere for mutual cooperationand understanding.

Extra-mundane communication: This is defined as communication between the livingand the dead in the super natural realm. It takes place between the various local deities, gods, goddesses and humans. It can occur through innovation, conjuring spiritual chants, libations,prayers, incantation, sacrifice and trance.

Naturally, in the African tradition, people appease their ancestral spirits in their daily prayers and sacrifices. It is believed that through such activities, causes of misfortunes or disaster can be ascertained. Shrines and oracles are channels of extra-mundane communication.

Signals: Wilson (2002) defines them as physical representation of a message. Signals include fire, gunshots and cannon shots. The gunshot is used in most African settings to communicate the death of an adult member of the community. It is also used to cement amarriage relationship or contract. The gunshot can also be used to welcome an importantdignitary visiting a community or to mark an important traditional ritual such as chieftaincyand other ceremonies. Repeated firing of a gun in a funeral could also indicate theimportance of the personality of the deceased. In some African communities a gunshot is used to mark the final journey of the death into the world beyond.

A cannon is closely related to a gunshot and may communicate the same message. It is a kind of explosive buried beneath the surface of the earth and detonated to produce a heavy and far reaching sound. Because of its high pitch, it is used to convey the death and rites of an illustrious son of the community to the neighbouring community.

Objectifics/symbolography: These are concrete items used to communicate certain messages based in a particular culture. They may have general application and usage beyond a particular culture. They include objects such as kolanut, native white chalk, charcoal, white chalk, white hen, palm frond etc. All these have specific meanings and implications for people who use them and they govern and regulate their lives and behaviour. Flagrant disregard for them is usually frowned at by members of that community.

Reckless disregard may sometimes attract sanctions to defaulting members of the community in question. For instance, presentation of kolanut to a visitor or stranger in Igboland and Northern Cross River State signifies a welcome of the visitor or stranger. In some African communities, hoisting of palm

frond on a parcel of land signifies that someone has acquired that land for farming or building project. Also, the use of fresh leave branch by motorists during students protest is indicative of peace and solidarity.

Kolanut has very serious implications in the African setting. It is used to seek approval and consent by an intending bride. It is also used for most traditional rituals.

The village head: The village head exercises enormous power and is responsible for the enforcement of laws. He is also regarded as the custodian of traditions of the people and symbol of government authorities. As agents of government they could also assist in thecollection of taxes,mobilize the people toward any development programmes such as health (immunisation)and enforcement of government policies and programmes. In addition to these functions, he also acts as agent of information.

Uniqueness Of Indigenous Media

Indigenous media are unique in several respects:

Traditional: Oramedia are traditionally based as they are transmitted from one generation to the other.

Language: Oramedia employs the local language of the people. This is both verbal and non-verbal and this makes them more appealing and effective.

Alternative media: The indigenous media provide an alternative means of communication and give the local people opportunity to participate in communication without stress. Messages from the mass media are relayed to the local people through inter-personal means using opinion leaders etc.

Culture: Indigenous media are derived from the culture of the people which makes the people have faith in the system.

Less expensive: Indigenous media are cheap and less expensive than the modern mass media. This makes them readily accessible for use almost at no cost. One does not need to pay money to listen to the voice of the town-crier while passing very vital information across to the local people.

Use of indigenous technology: The joy of using the local technology to disseminate information attracts special pride in the people.

Communal: Oramedia are communal in nature because they are used within the confines and understanding of a particular group of people. The communal nature makes them more enduring.

Indigenous media are generally credible, simple to use and understand.

Characteristics of Indigenous Media

Certain features or characteristics are common to traditional media of communication. These characteristics constitute their identifiable trademarks which are based on their nature, setting and functions. These characteristics as listed by Wilson (1997:98-100) include the fact that they are: authoritative, credible, transactional, integrative, non-alienating, adaptable, definitive, customary, ubiquitous, low-cost, popular and acceptable.

Ineji (2011)quotes Ogva (2008) as discussing characteristics of African communication systems in general terms such as:

Reach: African media system is ubiquitous because the channels can reach many rural people wherever they are found. This makes indigenous media amenable for messages that are out of the reach of the modem mass media.

Channel credibility: A message which source is questionable has no place or chance of being perceived appropriately by the audience. Messages transmitted by impersonal and anonymous source such as the modem mass media are often greeted with hostility and skepticism unlike the indigenous media which are familiar to the rural audience. This gives the message credibility and acceptability.

Channels of change: It has been proved by researchers that the diffusion of innovations is more readily accomplished through informal and interpersonal contacts in persuading people to adopt innovations. This gives credence to the mass media as being more effective in creating awareness and knowledge whereas indigenous or inter-personal media are channels of change. This makes it imperative for the integration of the two systems. Indigenous media are easily adaptable for the collections and

dissemination of development information. This can be easily achieved in village meetings, local and group association meeting etc.

Nature, Content and Functions of Indigenous Media

Traditional or indigenous media in the African rural setting take various forms and are generally directed towards achieving different goals. Wilson (2002:34) as reported by Ineji (2011) lists these goals to include: Directive; News, Advertising; public relations; entertainment and education,

Directives: This refers to traditional media serving as agents of administrative authorities and implementer of development, policies and programmes. Because they are highly revered and held in high esteem, traditional media are very effective when used in communal work and other public service. This is because they are usually followed by sanctions which accompany defaultersin the community. Directives usually take the form of instructions dished out by agents of traditional media (such as town-crier, village summon etc) to -groups or individuals to carry out certain decisions of traditional authority concerning certain events and issues. Such events may be health programme, immunization of children against polio. It may be a tax drive.

News: Like the mass media, traditional communication can give information on past events and occurrences of interest and importance to fellow citizens. It may border on the birth of a new baby, the death of a person or information on an important event such as the visit of a local government chairman or governor of a state.

Advertising: Advertising in the traditional Africa setting takes different forms. It can be done by displaying item or product for sale on a table, tree stump or shade. For example, if a bottle or calabash of palm wine is hung on a tree branch near a house it means that palm wine is available for sale. Advertising may take the form of hawking on the street when the hawkers shout the name of the product while inviting people by using attention getting devices.

Public relations: The interpersonal nature of public relations is favourable to public relations activities. It is carried out on one-to-one basis or person to organization basis. The effort is to promote the image of an individual in organization. In traditional communication, public relations can be done through bringing and extolling qualities of the person or organization whose image is being laundered. Great achievers such as warriors, successful farmers etc are usually promoted and recognized through activities of public relations. Drama, dance and concerts are channels through which public relations can be carried out.

Entertainment: Several aspects of entertainment through the traditional media abound in the African culture. Proverbs, riddles and jokes, folklore are all forms ofentertainment. Music, drama, etc, are freely given and received in both private and public settings.

Education: Socialization through informal education is part and parcel of African way of life. Parents have responsibilities of child-upbringing. Whereas it is the responsibility of the mother to groom the girl into womanhood, it is of the father to groom the boy intomanhood. Education can be carried out through cultural groups, age-grades, clubs, association and societies, etc.

Challenges of Indigenous Media

Like any other system, traditional media are not perfect in their operations. Wilson (1997:104) in advancing reasons for their usage and patronage equally presents their shortcomings which makes a review of the entire system imperative. These shortcomings or challenges include: technological deficiencies.Secondly, the fast pace of modem development makes it imperative that the system must move faster than before.Also, the system is limited by the problems of urbanization with its attendant consequences. The adoption of Christianity and Islam as modes of worship has displaced the traditional mode of worship and this has reduced the patronage of extra-mundane communication in both private and public functions.

Cultural diversity which has given rise to multiplicity of languages is a bane and animpediment to indigenous media. This accounts for diversity of African political systems,values, norms and beliefs. This has posed a serious challenge to communication scholars in terms of formulation of a national policy in indigenous media.

Another major challenge is the extinction of indigenous African languages.Adoption of English, French, Spanish and other foreign languages as official languages has almost put some African languages in the danger of going into extinction.The western culture has dominated the African environment and this has undermined African value systems - family set up, community and institutions. The erosion of African value system in various homes in Africa also threatens the folk media.Lack of pride in African tradition and values among the new generation of Africanchildren is a serious challenge to the African media system and Africa in general.

Thegeneral thinking however that is the best way to sustain indigenous media system in Africa is to selectively adopt and combine certain aspects of indigenous media which are useful with the modem mass media for the overall developmental aspirations of the developing nations.

Conclusion

It canbe safely inferred that indigenous media system willcontinue to play a crucial role in the lives of the Africans despite their perceived challenges. Therefore, there is need for government and development agents to consider their use along with the modern mass media for the benefit of the people.

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