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Indigenous Communication
Media Technology and their Relevance in the 21st Century

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Abstract:
This paper examines indigenous communication and undertakes a survey of the various media and technology of indigenous communication. It tries to see the relevance of this technology and media of indigenous communication, namely, instrumental communication; demonstrative communication; iconographic communication; extra-mundane communication; visual communication; institutional communication; venue oriented communication; myths and legends; names as communication; and folktales and proverbs – it examines their relevance in today's contemporary world. The article examines the challenges that indigenous communication faces in the modern world and concludes by making a number of recommendations, including the standardization of the different media of indigenous communication.

1. Introduction

Indigenous communication has been described in various ways by scholars in the field of communication, consistent perhaps with the rich and diverse nature of communication itself. A relatively new field of study in communication, Ojebode (2002:84) cites Mundy and Compton (1995:113) as defining indigenous communication as "the communication system that existed before the arrival of mass media and formally organized bureaucratic systems, and still exists today despite changes". In other words, if we apply this definition to the African situation, indigenous communication is the communication system that has existed in our different communities before the coming of Radio, Television and Newspapers prior to the arrival of foreign colonial powers; and have survived both the advent of these mass media and colonial government. This definition emphasizes communication as a system and/or process. A definition of indigenous communication emphasizing the media and/or channels of communication is provided by Wilson (1987), also cited in Ojebode (2002:84). Wilson describes indigenous communication as:

"Those media which have defied all efforts by western media to cannibalize them and perhaps supplant them...the 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".

Mundy and Lloyd-Laney (1999) emphasized that indigenous communication is an important aspect of culture and the means by which culture and indigenous knowledge embedded in them are preserved. It includes entertainment, persuasion, news, announcements and all types of social exchanges. In the same vein, Odunola and Segun (2009:8) cites Wang and Dissaanayke, (1984) as seeing indigenous communication as a system that encapsulates folklore which is ingrained in the culture of a community. This definition sees indigenous communication as a functional aspect of culture. Still on indigenous communication as culture, Anso-Kyeremeh, (1998) defines indigenous communication as "any form of communication system, which by nature of its origin, form and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in such a way and manner that requires the utilization of values, symbolism, institution and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualifier and attributes". (Odunola and Segun, 2009:8).

From these definitions, it can be seen that indigenous communication system is rooted in the people's culture, that it is the communication system of particular communities and in particular localities, using media that have existed long before modern mass media and colonial government(s), and has survived them. What is often not directly stated but can always be inferred is that indigenous communication system in Africa is that communication system that is authentically indigenous to African societies in its various media and/or forms.

Mundy and Lloyd-Laney (1999) gave six examples of indigenous media. These are:

- Folk Media: used primarily for entertainment to promote education, social values and cultural practices. Each culture has its own form of folk media. These include songs, dance, puppetry, festivals, plays, story-telling, debates, proverbs, parades and so on.
- Indigenous Organizations: examples include mutual help work groups, cooperative societies, associations to manage irrigation facilities, mothers' clubs and networks of formal and informal agreements that link traders with their suppliers and customers.

- Deliberate Instruction: under this medium of indigenous communication, parents teach children, crafts people instruct apprentices, elders guide youths, and adolescent undergo initiation rites. Much of the information that is needed to survive is learned not through the occasional puppet show or even schools or the mass media but through deliberate instruction.
- Informal Channel: carry the bulk of indigenous communication. At home, in the tea house, in the fields and on the road, in the chief's house and at the market – all are situations where technical information and skills can be communicated. Such communication cannot be orchestrated or controlled, but is spontaneous and informal.
- Records may take many forms: Balinese irrigation associations traditionally write land ownership records and tax obligations on palm leaves. African story-tellers narrate and memorize historical epics in detail and at length.
- Direct Observation: communication does not have to be intentional or even involve another person. Most learning during childhood and apprenticeship is a result of imitation.

Aboyade (1987) cited by Ojebode (2002) gives the following as examples of indigenous media and technology:- town criers, dispatch riders, talking drums, market places, village squares, schools, churches, mosques, community leaders. However as Ojebode (2002) notes, churches and mosques cannot be regarded as indigenous media because they were originally imported.

Wilson, (1987) in Ojebode (2002) classified indigenous media into ten. These are:

- Idiophones which refers to self-sounding instruments such as gongs, woodblocks, wooden drums, bells and rattles;
- Membranophones which produce sounds at the vibration of membranes, examples are the Yoruba talking drum and the Tiv *Gbande*
- Aerophones which produce sounds as a result of air vibration. Examples are flutes, whistles, reed pipes and horns;
- Symbolography, that is symbolic representation or writing which may be cryptic or esoteric. Examples are the use of palm leaves tied in a variety of styles to convey a variety of messages; the fabric patterns of Ashanti's etc.
- Signals which are physical embodiments of a message such as drum beats, fire, gunshots etc;
- Objectifics which are media presented in concrete forms such as kola nuts, charcoal, white pigeon, cowries, etc. their meaning are often culture restricted.
- Colour schemes: the way colours are combined convey different meanings in different societies;
- Music which may be supplied by sedentary or nomadic minstrels.
- Extra-mundane communication refers to communication that cuts across the three African worlds – the unborn, the living and the dead, and takes the form of prayers, ritual, sacrifice etc.
- Symbolic displays such as smiling, expressions of anger, disgust, happiness etc.

Odunola and Segun (2009:9) classified indigenous communication system as comprising of the following media: instrumental communication; demonstrative communication; iconographic communication; extra-mundane communication; visual communication and institutional communication. Others are venue oriented communication; myths and legends; names as communication and folktales and proverbs. These are briefly examined as follows:

Instrumental Communication: This medium of communication includes Wilson's (1988) classification of idiphonic communication instruments. These are self sounding like instruments like metal gongs, woodblocks, wooden drum bell and rattles. We also have aerophonic communication which involves instruments producing sounds as a result of the vibration of a column of air such as flutes, horns from plants and animals and whistles. Then there are membranophonic instruments which uses skin or leather drums to produce signals and messages through the vibration of the membrane which is beaten by hand or with a stick. **Iconographic Communication:** Odunola and Segun (2009:10) explain icons as comprising elements or objects which are representative of other concepts. They gave as examples kolanuts, palm fronds. Wilson's(1988) objectifics also fall under the medium of iconography. **Extra-Mundane Communication:** This is communication between humans and supernatural beings and spirits. It is in the form of supplications, chants, incantation, divinations and even sacrifices. The communication in this medium can be horizontal or vertical, i.e. top down or bottom up. "Bottom up defines supplications through prayers and divinations to the supernatural entities while the top down signifies response from the spiritual beings in way of answered prayers or the revealing of their will concerning an issue through the oracle or priests or priestesses". (Odunola and Segun 2009:10). **Visual communication:** According to Akpabio (1998) there are various visual cues such as colors, tribal marks, appearance, tattoos, etc; various colours like white, red and black symbolize parity, danger and mourning respectively in different Nigerian cultures. Wilson's (1988) color scheme and signal fits into this medium.

We also have **Institutional Communication** which is made up of social institutions such as marriage, rites of passage, naming ceremonies, conferment of chieftaincy titles etc. Institutional communication sometimes goes beyond activities within a particular or social group to include other people from other cultures and societies, e.g. inter-tribal marriages, social and cultural festivals etc. **Venue-Oriented Communication:** Writing on venue-oriented communication as a medium of indigenous communication, Odunola and Segun, (2009:11) explain that "there are some kinds of communication that are allowed and some that are not allowed in particular places. In Yoruba for example, certain words are not permitted in the king's court". **Myths and legends:** Myths have been defined as a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous through which a given culture ratifies its social norms, customs or accounts for the origin of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms (Akporotaro, 2006). On the other hand, legends are stories that bestow supernatural endowment or attributes to powerful people or natural phenomena in the process of their deification. Legends are a reflection of a people's culture, traditions, beliefs, and philosophy and experiences, deeply rooted in tradition; e.g. the legend of Ogun (god of iron), Olokun (goddess of the sea), Sango (god of thunder) in Yoruba mythology. **Names in Communication:** In most indigenous traditional societies, the family's situation and the situation surrounding the birth of a child has a great influence on the choice of

name for that child. Indigenous names also communicate the peculiar history of a family, their aspiration and situation. **Proverbs and Folktales:** Proverbs are sentences loaded with meanings beyond the literal one. According to Odunola and Segun (2009), it is generally believed in Africa that too much talk on an important issue makes it to lose credence hence the proverbs are economical in the presentation of important and pertinent issues. African folktale on the other hand is enshrouded in myth and legends. Apart from being a great source of entertainment especially for the young, folktales have been identified as a great channel of oral tradition through which education and information is passed from one generation to another. It also helps in conforming to the norms and customs of the society.

2. Relevance and Challenges of Indigenous Media Today

As was earlier stated, indigenous communication is closely tied to a people's culture and way of life – to the world view of a people. In this sense, indigenous communication could be referred to as cultural communication. The point could also be made that indigenous communication would be difficult to locate in the mass communication level as the concept is defined today. Instead indigenous communication can be located at the following levels of communication – intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, group communication, public communication and cultural communication.

Ugboajah (1985) made this point when writing on "Oral media" an earlier term for indigenous communication. Both on its relation to culture and level of communication, he states:

 Folk media cannot.... be conveniently separated from folk cultures in whose context they are significant. One can perhaps look at folk media as a group media, but it is better to regard them as interper-sonal media speaking to the common man in his language, in his idiom and dealing with problems of direct relevance to his situation.

The point is that indigenous communication system is intimately related to a people's culture and way of life and that it is difficult to locate it at the level of mass communication as the concept of mass communication is defined today.

The ten media of indigenous communication as outlined by Odunola and Segun, (2009) would be examined to see how relevant each medium is in the light of modern contemporary realities of the world of today.

The position of this paper is that for indigenous communication to survive as a distinct area in communication study, each of its medium must be able to adapt and prove itself relevant in the modern world. Communication is dynamic and not static. Concepts of communication are also universal and not localized. In other words, indigenous communication must be able to stand on its own and be willing to be studied and examined like other areas or levels of communication. We now examine the various media of indigenous communication.

3. Instrumental Communication

As Odunola and Segun (2009:9) point out:

The Drum and other instruments in this category serve various communication purpose ranging from attention getting devices as in the case o the metal gong which is an indispensable tool of a town crier, alerting functions e.g. various instruments to security alerts, summoning people for communal meeting and invocation of ancestral spirits. These functions vary and are largely determined by the socio-cultural milieus of a given society.

It can be argued that these instruments are still very relevant, in the rural setting especially. However considering its population size in relation to urban areas, this instruments must have and do have relevance for urban areas. The use of drums for example may not be as widespread as it was in passing information and making announcements, but it is still employed in ceremonies both in urban and rural areas. In installation of kings, in the palace, in marriages and naming, the drum still plays vital roles. The same goes for other instruments listed.

It must however be pointed out that unless these instruments are made more relevant to modern life, the medium may become extinct in the not too distance future. The instruments especially Drums, can be made part of all important Government activities and celebrations; local, state and federal.

4. Iconographic Communication

Odunola and Segun (2009) see icons as comprising elements or objects which are representative of another concept. They point out that in this context; some objects have universal use but different connotations and communicative functions. "The kolanut for example in Nigeria for example (sic) is a valuable cash crop in the West, greatly consumed in the North, and highly reverenced and celebrated in the East". (Odunola and Segun, 2009:10). They gave items which may fall under this category to include water offered in Yoruba, Igbo and other African cultures to welcome visitors, palm fronds to indicate the presence of shrines and various forms of coded messages understood by the initiator and decoder of the messages.

How is iconographic communication relevant to modern times? How can the medium be used today? One of the challenges of indigenous communication is the fact that most times it is culture and location specific. Take Nigeria as a nation; to study indigenous communication in Nigeria may require, as much studies as there are communities or cultures in Nigeria. More to the point, the results may yield different insights and interpretations. What is a medium in one community may merely be an object in another. A palm frond, no matter how arranged, may not connote any meaning in some cultures. A kola nut may not connote rich meanings in some communities as in others. At another level is the question of whether the use of the medium is still widespread or diminishing or is limited to just rural areas of the nation and African continent. Again the survival of this medium of indigenous communication would depend largely on how it can be adapted to the modern world, in other words how it can be used in relationships and for survival in the modern world. If this medium cannot be adapted so that it can be usefully employed, it would become extinct, or a relic only of interest to anthropologists.

5. Visual Communication

According to Akpabio (1998) cited by Odunola and Segun (2009) different cues supplied through colors, tribal marks, appearance, tattoos etc communicate effectively. Visual Communication as a medium of indigenous communication is the use of sight to perceive objects and deriving meaning from this perception. Wilson (1998:56) describes visual communication as "what happens to the receiver when a certain effect is produced by light on the eye and this brings about his realization of the different shades of colours as may be visible through a colour spectrum". He went on to add that clothing, appearance and general compartment of a communicator have effect on the receiver. In this regard different colours (of clothing for example), tribal marks, general appearance all communicate. Colours like white, red and black may symbolize purity danger and mourning respectively.

This medium of indigenous communication arguably is easier to understand across cultures, for example where colours, tribal marks and appearance are concerned. It is very possible to accurately guess a person's tribe by tribal markings. However, it is noted that tribal marking is no longer in vogue and so, that aspect of the medium is becoming dated. This medium of indigenous communication can be standardized across cultures and therefore endure.

6. Institutional Communication:

As Wilson, (1998:58) points out institutional communication "involves the use of cultural or traditional institutions to communicate symbolically and is an extension of the extra-mundane mode of communication. The most important of such institutions are marriage, chieftaincy, secret societies, shrines, masks and masquerades. There is a lot of communication in the enactment of activities of each of the institutions".

If the relevance of this medium is critically examined it would be seen that most of the components of institutional communication have only survived (those that have survived) in highly modified, some would state adulterated, forms. Rites of passage, where they are still conducted are stripped of most of the content that give them cultural meaning. Marriages are now more of Islamic and Christian ceremonies with little or no indigenous content. The institution of traditional ruler ship has been totally stripped of all its powers and now holds little or no awe for the people. Death and naming, like marriages, are now Islamic and Christian ceremonies with little indigenous content.

It is true that institutional communication as a medium of indigenous communication has adapted and survived. It is debatable however if the indigenous content of what this institutions communicates has not greatly diminished.

7. Venue Oriented Communication

Depending on where communication takes place, there are certain types of communication that are allowed and some types that are not allowed. Odunola and Segun (2009) cite the example of Yoruba culture in which certain words cannot be uttered in the king's court. Also, it is permissible to make jest of people on sensitive issues without the affected party taking offence if the venue is appropriate. They cite Dobo (1966) as having identified two categories of venue oriented communication; geographic and social. Geographic implies the movement of people to the pace of event and the communication taking place there, e.g. play ground, market place stream, wells etc. This medium can also be likened to the "unstructured channels such as home, near the wells, on the fields, on the road, in the tea house and other places where spontaneous and informal exchanges occur (Mundy and Compton, 1995 cited in Ojebode, 200:87).

These medium of indigenous communication has adapted well to contemporary times and is very relevant especially in diffusion and adoption of innovations. The medium also exist in fairly similar manners in all indigenous communities and across cultures.

8. Extra-Mundane Communication

This medium of indigenous communication refers to communication and exchanges that takes place between the unborn, the living, the dead, supernatural beings and the Supreme Being. This medium takes the form of prayers, sacrifice, libation, incantation, chant, invocation, witchcraft, vision, exorcism and contemplation (Wilson, 1998).

According to Akpabio (1998) cited in Odunola and Segun (2009:10) "extra-mundane communication is a complex endeavor that traditionally involves intrapersonal processes, physical revelation, magical and wordy verbalization (incantation), spiritual trans-migration etc".

This medium of communication exists in all societies. However, in the African society, it is given special prominence because the African world view is such that recognizes the unbroken chain between the unborn, the living and the dead, and between human beings and supernatural beings. The African world view is that there is constant and active communication going on among all these. Thus extra-mundane communication is a very important aspect of indigenous communication.

Extra-mundane communication as a medium of indigenous communication has survived in different forms. In rural areas, where we still have a significant number of users of this medium people still hold firmly to the African worldview and engage in this form of communication. Even in urban areas, a sizeable number of people engage in this communication. Still it must be acknowledged that the vast majority (arguably) of Nigerians practice Islam and Christianity. But even among those a significant number engage in extra-mundane communication in the context of the African worldview.

Is the medium relevant to the modern world? One could argue that, considering the number of its practitioners, it is not very relevant. It has mostly been modified to adapt to the changing realities. Human sacrifices are no longer common, most sacrifices have been monetized. The result is that retaining its indigenous essence has proved difficult. Unfortunately, an examination of the original essence of this medium and its current form is difficult to be studied because of the nature of the medium.

9. Myths and Legends
Akorobaro (2006) defines myths as "a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous through which a given culture ratifies its social norms, customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms" (cited in Odunola and Segun, 2009:10).

On the other hand legends are stories that bestow supernatural endowment or attribute to powerful people or natural phenomena in the process of their deification. We have legends in virtual all communities. They reflect peoples' culture, tradition, beliefs, and philosophy and experiences.

Myths and legends are relevant in today's world to give people a sense of history and identity. Despite the propensity of science to explain all phenomena, there is a deep psychological need in people that myths and legend fulfill. Some thing are better romanticized and mystified than explained as ordinary.

10. Names in Communication
As Odunola and Segun (2009:11) explain, "in most Nigerian traditional societies, the situation in the family and those surrounding the birth of a child in particular has a great influence in the choice of name to be given to the child". This medium of indigenous communication enables a family to use the name of a child to tell a story about the child and the family. This medium of communication is very relevant, again to give a person a sense of history and identity.

11. Proverbs and Folktales
This medium of indigenous communication is well known in the African society. Proverbs are expressions that have deeper connotative meaning beyond the surface meaning.

Odunola and Segun, (2009:12) make the following points about this medium of communication:

It is generally believed in Africa that too much talk on an important issue makes it to lose credence; hence proverbs are economical in the presentation of important and pertinent issues…. African folktales is enshrouded in myths and legends. Apart from being a great source of entertainment especially for the young, folktales have been identified as a great channel of oral tradition through which education and information is passed down from one generation another.

Like in the case of media of myths and legends, and names in communication, proverbs and folk tales are of great relevance even today for the sense of history and particularly identify (as in this case) the medium provides.

12. Conclusion and Recommendations
From the examination of the media of indigenous communication that has been done, it is clear that the media has undergone a lot of transformation especially when one examines such media as institutional communication, instrumental communication and extra-mundane communication. Other media such as venue-oriented communication have proved relevant even in these times.

What is clear is that for indigenous communication media to survive and continue to be relevant there is an urgent need to review with a view to adapting the recommendation made by Ugboajah (1985). These recommendations, adapted as the suggestions of this paper are as follows:

- A comprehensive annotated worldwide bibliography on the use of indigenous communication media.
- An inventory of indigenous communication media systems and structures showing their origins and purposes, mode and format, their technological adaptations and their constraints.
- Specific case studies of major indigenous communication structures or processes.
- Studies which involve possible integration of indigenous communication forms with modern mass media or group media.
- Effectiveness studies which would compare one indigenous communication medium structure with another.
- Above all this paper strongly recommends the standardization of indigenous communication media and technology across cultures and communities.

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