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## **TRADITION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE USE OF INDIGENOUS CHANNELS FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION, THE EXAMPLE OF AN IGBO COMMUNITY IN NIGERIA.**

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### **Preamble**

*This study investigates the role of tradition in the development communication process in a rural community, and its interface with new media, ideas and precepts. It also determines the consequences these interactions have for development communication. The data for this research were collected through focus group discussion (FGD). From the study of various communication systems, findings show that tradition and communication can unite for effective development communication process. Some of these indigenous channels like soups, folk tale, festivals etc. can be successfully used to communicate exogenous message, new ideas and precept to the people. If these exogenous messages are therefore packaged in artistic forms rooted in the culture of the people, they will have a better chance of getting the desired impact among the rural recipients. In this regard therefore this study concludes that those engaged in rural development activities, couldn't afford to ignore the media, which are indigenous and familiar to the people.*

### **Introduction**

In Africa, traditions have roles they play especially in the sustenance of the society. These traditions, which are testimonies of the past, are short of communal activities, which tell the precepts, value permanent and change aspect of the society (Ryder, 1975). As it were, they are transmitted from generation to generation (Vansina, 1965).

This study, which is basically on tradition, will determine the role of tradition in development. It will examine how indigenous channels can be used to pass developmental information to the people. Indigenous communication channels have values, which serve as a means of communication activities. It is an important aspect of culture and a means, by which a culture is preserved, handed down, responds to new situations and adapts. Unlike exogenous channels of communication, which have limited range, indigenous channels by contrast are ubiquitous. They are needed to convey messages to people out of reach of exogenous channels. The most common way of communication among the Igbos is by verbal expression, in a face-to-

face situation. The speaker formulates his message and transmits it orally by word of mouth to his audience (Chiezey, 1982:16).

The efficiency of traditional modes of communication has been demonstrated by Ugboaja who called these traditional modes "Oramedia" emphasizing their most visible attribute: orality (Ugboaja, 1986). Indigenous channels have high credibility because they are familiar and are locally controlled. They also offer opportunity for participation of local people in communication among themselves and with development professionals and decision-makers. (Madu, 1999). Indigenous communication, packaged in artistic forms, rooted in the culture of the people, if ignored can result in inappropriate development effort (Mundy, Paul And Compton 1991).

### Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, governments, local, state and national have made and are still making conscious effort to develop the rural areas where about 80% of the total population live (Aboyade, 1990). Today, some of the yearning of our rural dwellers include, ensuring a better quality of life through improved and accessible health services, provision of facilities for the education of adult and children and availability of utilities such as good roads, good drinking water, electricity etc. Whereas government has fashioned out and is making efforts to implement some of the needs of the rural people within the constraints of available resources, the people for whom the plans are being made hardly know about them thus creating a gap in communication, resulting in low level of participation in what affects them. In order to achieve this, therefore, the people must be properly informed. Their leaders must carry them along through the use of local approaches and methods.

The government and its functionaries have a responsibility to provide necessary communication about their activities to make the people knowledgeable about the happening around them and also generate in them the right attitude and encourage the adoption of desirable value system (Aboyade 1990). Rural life is considerably influenced by tradition, which encourages awareness in the individual on the need to preserve the knowledge of the ancestry and past generation. Tradition therefore governs almost every aspect of living in the rural community.

In view of the fact that rural communities tend to be more tradition bound than urban communities, it is important that the role of tradition in development in such communities be given more attention than has been the case. Specifically, what is the role, if any, of tradition in the development communication process in such rural communities? How does the interface between tradition and new media, ideas and precepts work out, and what consequences for development communication. This is the central focus of attention of

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this study as it outlines a case study of Okuku community in Imo State. Idachaba (1985), Oyaide (1988) and Lele (1975) have argued succinctly that past government efforts in rural development in Africa and Nigeria in particular have failed to develop the rural areas. This is evident in the high level of poverty, illiteracy and lack of social amenities, which are the main features of rural areas. According to Oyaide (1988), the reasons for the low performance of rural development efforts are that:

*Rural development programmes are planned from top without adequate consideration for the economic, social and cultural aspiration of the rural people. P.27*

Another observation about the failure of rural developments was made by Aboyade (1984), Lawani (1981), Mchombu (1992) who maintained that the failure of rural development programmes in East Africa and Nigeria was due to the process of information transfer with the rural communities. Mchombu (1992) argued further that in spite of considerable expenditure by governments, donor agencies, the amount of relevant and useable information for rural areas is dismally low and impact in creating conditions which foster rapid rural development negligible. Warren (1991) rightly argued that:

*The case for using indigenous knowledge in project work is straightforward. Technical solution to unperceived Problems are not readily adopted, New technologies that duplicate indigenous ones are superfluous, and ignoring local approvals to local problems is wasteful p.7.*

#### **African Traditional Media of Communication**

African societies have developed their own method of communication before the advent of new media. In his study, Wilsons (1972) argues that the traditional system of communication is a continual process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies, which have not been seriously dislocated, by Western or any other external influence. Traditional system of communication also refers to the mode of control (ownership) and model. It is important he continued, to note that under the traditional system, ownership of the means of communication lies with the society. The village head only acts as a trustee. According to Falana, (1979).

*.....there is sufficient evidence to prove that one of the earliest attempts by man to communicate beyond the range of human speech was made in Africa... in black Africa, the sound media had been developed and improved upon long before modern electronic media were ever conceived. The people of the Congo in Central Africa send messages with Tom-Tom or drum that virtually talks...*

The traditional media of communication have been used for disseminating information to the rural dwellers before any other

modern form of communication. The form of communication according to Oduko (1987) is exclusively integrated into local cultures and highly face-to-face activities from the source to the receiver. Soola (1988) argued that:

*Since many of the black Africa cultures are basically non-literate tradition oral forms of communication play a significant role in the indigenous network. P.79.*

He went on to list traditional network as town criers, talking drums and union leaders etc. Etukudo (1987) lists the media of communication in rural community as follows: the town crier, drums, songs, dance, festivals, etc. In the words of Rogers (cited by Opubor (1975), a far-flung network of communication channels existed in less developed countries before the introduction of print or electronic media.

Wilson (1987) found out that in the old Calabar province, the town criers employ these forms of carrying out his communication roles: Idiphones, Membranophones, Aerophones, Symbology, signals, objects, colour schemes, music, extra-mandance communication and symbolic display. According to Andah (1992) Nigerian and indeed African drummers have customarily applied the redundancy principle to drum communication. In his words:

*It seems that Africa drum message had employed the redundancy principles in transmitting information prior to the formulation to his theory by Europeans. p.115... The drum message was used in pre-European and pre-Colonial days as a means of broadcasting information or news over long distance. P.117.*

Writing on the nature and content of traditional media, Wilson argues that communication process in rural areas of Nigeria take various forms and are meant to achieve different objectives, mainly, "directives, news, advertising, public relations, entertainments, and education. Directives for him are carried out through announcements concerning public or community works, duties or responsibilities of the collective citizenry, which must be carried out, or defaulters within the community face certain sanctions. Also instructions to indigenous groups like women's group, men's groups, youth groups, religious groups, village co-operatives, local political leaders, and individuals in extended family to carry out certain decisions of the traditional authority. The traditional authority also announces forthcoming events by this use of directives.

Summarizing the function of traditional method of communication, Wilson argues that traditional communication systems are complex and function as part of the larger socio-political organization. He outlined five functions of traditional communication system thus: (1) reporting and criticizing organs within the system; (2) issuing directives from legitimate, or in some cases titular head; (3) providing education in the norms and mores of the society;

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(4) stimulating the emotions; (5) generally providing the light to innovations and helping their diffusion; and (6) serves as a source of cultural, political, health and other educational and enlightenment programmes for the masses leading them towards self-actualization and national development.

Thus, their function is more diverse and far-reaching than is often admitted. Wilson concluded his paper by mentioning the problems associated with traditional communication media, which have retarded the uses of traditional communication media in Africa. According to him,

*"Chief among these problems is the lack of a standard technical-vocabulary in the description, analysis and conceptualization of the media, channels and process of traditional communication."*  
P.29.

Other problems outlined by Wilson include: (a) The authoritarian nature of its mode of operation and the content of its information; (b) Inadequate information on the operations and functions of all identifiable media and channels usable in traditional societies; (c) Problem of teaching traditional communication arts since the language of the subjects is not yet standardized; (d) Scientific and technological problem; and (e) The content between traditional political system in African society and the adopted Western system.

Wilson however raises the need to contain these problems by standardizing traditional media instructions, their symbols, and meaning and to modernize traditional media instrument.

### **Culture and Communication**

The cultural context of communication has been properly examined in a dialogue on communication and development organized by African leadership forum. The forum was emphatic that for communication to be effective and aid national development, it must take cognizance of its socio-cultural milieu. It observed that communication was itself part of a people's culture and to a large extent reflected that culture.

The forum under the chairmanship of General Olusegun Obasanjo in a critical examination of culture and communication maintained that there are some aspects of culture, which inhibited effective development. The participant recalled social taboos and cultural norms from their ethnic areas, which were restrictive of communication. Some of these social taboos include questions on: (a) the number of children in one's family; (b) the income earned by an individual; and (c) the nature of an individual's illness.

Such questions were regarded intrusive, if not altogether forbidden. Communication with strangers, such as opinion canvassers or field investigators was not generally encouraged.

It was the belief of the forum that it was important to understand and appreciate the origin and necessity for such attitude, of the people, which inhibits information dissemination. It recognized that in the traditional past, there was strong need to protect the intellectual property of the community, a practice which was virtually universal and which, in developed countries, was institutionalized through the guild system.

The forum nonetheless recognized that this restrictive attitude to information made the work of social research and data gathering for development very difficult. The forum noted that there were various ways of getting around such resistance and distracts from them, a proper observance of protocol could win the confidence of respondents and make them willing to talk freely. Similarly, sheer diligence and the creative use of an indirect rather than a frontal approach could be productive of valuable results. Also an understanding of the culture, the forum re-affirmed, could help minimize the difficulties surrounding the communication process in a country such as Nigeria.

Writing on interrelationship of communication and African culture, (Moemeka 1989) argues that culture and communication have symbiotic relationship. For him, culture determines the code, context and meaning of communication, and communication is the life-wire of any culture, without communication, no culture can survive.

He defined cultural communication as what occurs in "traditional" or rural African environment, where "pure" African culture predominates. The two systems of communication - verbal and non-verbal obtain everywhere in the African communication environment. Transmission of culture in most rural African societies is almost entirely through interpersonal communication carried out in small groups (family meetings) and large group (village meeting) Moemeka (1989) mentioned the market-place, the village school and social forums, and funeral and festival occasions as important channels for disseminating cultural information. In addition, storytellers and praise singers retrieve the exploits and experience of past and present generations and thus help educate the younger generations.

Moemeka (1989) concluded that communication in a rural setting is almost always a question of attitude to one's neighbor which has been acquired from generation and new ideas is dependent on how such an action will affect established relationship which, invariably, has been shaped by the culture.

#### **Communication**

Simply put, communication is the transmission or "passing of ideas, information and attitudes from person to person" (Williams 1961). In the words of Charles E. Osgood (n.d):

In the most general sense, we have communication whenever one system, a source, influences another, the destination, by manipulation of alternative *Signals which can be transmitted over the channel Connecting the...*

### Methodology

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used to collect data for this study. Essentially, this involved a group discussion that gathered people together from similar backgrounds and experiences to discuss topics central to the objectives of this study. Generally the participants were purposively chosen. Focus groups were conventionally homogeneous, that is, the participants were recruited to particular groups on the basis of some common characteristics, to maximize within the group, and to avoid a situation where individuals dominate or withdraw because of difference in class, sex, age, experience, acquired knowledge, or any other characteristics salient to the discussion.

The discussions were also characterized by group dynamics. The informal setting relaxed atmosphere and open-ended nature of questions were used to encourage participants feel free from the constraint typical of one to one interview and ensured they expressed their view openly and spontaneously. The settings of the discussions on this research were in the neutral and natural settings. For instance, the Ekeiwu Okuku market square and the Okuku community school were used as venues. The researcher allowed for sufficient time for the recruitment of members of the group. Also the times of session (date and hour) were appropriate and convenient to the members. The size of the groups ranges from 5 - 15. The researcher also acted as a facilitator. He was responsible in ensuring that the discussions were conducted in a relaxed manner bearing in mind the objectives of the research. The researcher made use of a discussion guide, which had earlier been prepared. The discussion guide the researcher used in this study was based on the following headings, which are central to the objectives of the study:

- ❖ The various traditional channel of communication in Igbo society, their forms and to what extent these channels can serve their communication needs especially as it affects development.
- ❖ How appropriate indigenous methods of development communication can be utilized to make information available for use by the local community.

In this study, the facilitator/researcher was ably assisted by a note taker/ recorder. The following materials/ instruments were made available for the exercise, tape recorder, cassettes, papers, pencils, biro's etc. the note taker, took notes during the session and recorded the discussions. He was able to retain the impression and information given by members of the group.

In most of the sessions, entertainments were provided for the members of the group. This in no small way encouraged them and showed that the researcher is appreciative of their time and energy in honouring the researcher's call. In all most of the sessions went on as planned. The record of discussions was complete and accurate.

#### Question Guide

- (i) How flexible are these local channels to accommodate exogenous messages?
- (ii) What is your perception of any information that is rooted in the culture of the people i.e. festival, local soups, dramas, folk-tales, oral poetry etc?.
- (iii) Describe how you can transplant government message into oral narrative which the people appreciate using indigenous channels.

#### Findings

From the data collected, the following findings were made as shown in Table 1.

The use of songs as an indigenous channel of communication in Okuku has been found to be effective also for the transmission of exogenous message from either the government or any of the development agencies. Songs are flexible enough to allow new media, ideas and precepts to be incorporated into them. Therefore, the ideals of the Family Support Programme (FSP), the message of the War Against and Corruption (WAIC), the objective of the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), the health instruction as contained in the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) and the family planning can easily be composed into a song which the people of the community can easily learn and sing to themselves anytime they wish. These songs can also be composed to expression opinion or vent anger on a particular way of life. For instance, the Governments action against Indiscipline can be promoted in the rural areas with use of songs.

Apart from songs another indigenous communication channel observed in the study, which can play an appreciable role in the communication of exogenous development activities in Okuku community, is folktales. If purposively and effectively used, modern development information can be transplanted into familiar oral narratives. These oral narratives must belong to the people of the community. The result will be that the people will take it as theirs, provided that it is not over loaded with foreign content. The new oral narrative which has modern development information transplanted in it, will heighten interest more than the original exogenous channels being used. This will invariably lead to positive approach and

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consequent acceptance of the messages by the people of the community.

The Ihuji festivals which the researcher observed is another channel of communication in Okuku, which can be used effectively in the dissemination of modern information, ideas and precept of exogenous development activities. As has been shown earlier on in this study, festivals in Okuku are mostly connected with agriculture and rural developments. These festivals often signal the times for planting and harvesting important crops. During this festival, hints on the nature of the crops, and how to ensure good yield are given. The participants in the focus group discussion see the new yam festival as a period for the communication of information about farming and related issues.

This opportunity can be utilized effectively by development workers to communicate externally initiated programme of the government. Since the people are still very receptive to the message ideas and precepts communicated during festivals, the festivals thus provide an effective indigenous channel for the communication of exogenous information and ideas.

These externally-initiated development activities which can be communicated using traditional festivals include exogenous information on the climate, soil, vegetation, cultivation, pests, pesticides, how to secure loan from the government and how to form cooperative societies to enable them to purchase fertilizer. The people who are receptive to these festivals will see the new messages and new ideas as true because the channel is local, familiar and locally controlled by them. The result will be the increase in their productivity and improvement in the quality and condition of community life and the capacity for community integration and self-direction.

Another channel observed in this study as being capable of communicative impact is oral poetry. The community has its own poems as already shown. These oral poems are composed for any occasion or situation imaginable. Oral poetry as an indigenous channel of communication in Okuku community is flexible enough to have ideas successfully incorporated into it. All that needs to be done is to have some ideas or information the government or any other external agency wants the people to have on any of its initiated development activities. These new ideas, information, precepts can be cast in the form of oral poetry (NKPUKPO-ONU). The traditional mode of reciting the oral poetry commands more emotional reaction from the people than the direct sway of communication. "Our forefathers have used this oral poetry in this our land to encourage people, prevent wars, praise warriors and denounce anti-social acts".

Some of the participants in this study narrated how religious groups in the community are already taking advantages of this traditional channel of communication in their religious revivals to

drive their points home. They cast some religious truth in the form of oral poetry. This method was preferred to the direct way of reading the Bible. The congregation empathizes more with the method being communicated because of the emotion it generates.

Apart from oral poetry, the researcher observed the use of folk drama in the community. Folk drama can be used to drive home a point related to traditional value system. This therefore helps the people of the community to communicate indigenous information on their internally initiated development activities.

This same channel can also be used to communicate exogenous information, especially on rural development activities initiated by the government at national, state and local government levels. Information on programmes of non-governmental agencies can also be disseminated using folk drama. This is simply done by getting the points of view being advocated by the external development agencies in a rough-and-ready manner. The folk dramatists who are endowed will then dramatize these points of view in a direct and unambiguous manner. In this process, efforts should be made to understand these points of views being advocated. The generality of the audience who are members of the local community like in the other indigenous channels take the message very seriously. New ideas on war against indiscipline and corruption WAIC, the need to participate in the political transition programme, the family support programme (FSP) can be dramatized to the people. This channel is familiar and local to the people and will make greater impact than the exogenous channel of communication like radio, television, newspapers, magazines etc.

The traditional use of town criers for the dissemination of local message from local authorities is very popular in Okuku community. Also new idea, information and precepts from external authorities like nation, state and local government authorities can take advantage of this medium to communicate rural development activities.

This is done by liaising with the local authority who in turn see the message to be disseminated as beneficial to the people of the community. Once they are convinced on the benefit to be derived, the authority now summons the town crier and instruct him on what to say. In the case of some villages, the Eze may be the sole authority to be consulted.

The two-crier now cloaked in the aura of the traditional ruler of the local authority who has sent him, goes about informing the people as directed by the Eze. The exogenous messages could be inform of asking that children below the age of five should go for immunization against the six killer diseases, the need to be neat as contained in the environmental sanitation programme, child space and birth control.

The message being delivered by the town crier makes for a greater rapport and is regarded with utmost respect and attention because he not only speaks the language of the people, he also speaks their

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local dialect. As is traditional with the people, those who heard the message first pass it on to those who have not heard.

It is now taken for granted that the message is now coming from their local authority or chief who has sent the town crier. Consequently the message is discussed among the people of the community until it permeates the whole community. This is a form of indirect method of communicating exogenous message among the people through their traditional ruler who they think can never deceive members of the community hence the message is most likely to make an impact.

The use of indigenous organization for the dissemination of indigenous message can also play an important role in the dissemination of exogenous information for the prosecution of externally initiated development activities.

From the participant observation, it was observed that messages are communicated through the local leaders, union executives, market women, youth association members, clan heads and the elders' forum. People in the community find messages from these indigenous channels to be more significant to them than what is communicated through the exogenous channels. They see the indigenous channels as familiar, local and reliable. They provide the most effective way of communication because the sources (the indigenous organization) and the receiver (the community members) share similar beliefs, norm and value system.

These credible indigenous communication channels can be used to communicate exogenous message by leasing with the leaders of the indigenous organization who will in turn convince the members of their organizations on the need of the message and even arrange for the execution of the programmes. Rural development personnel can route their messages to the people through the indigenous organizations for the execution of externally initiated programmes.

Proverb, which is also an indigenous channel of communication in Okuku community, can be used for the communication of exogenous message that aims at sensitizing the people about externally generated development programmes. Since the people of the community see proverb as being able to reinforce everyday conversation, it makes the message richer and clearer to the community members.

Since the community members understand proverbs, exogenous messages cast into proverbs can make messages clearer, richer and more effective to the audience. The communicative impact of proverbs usually encourages the people of the community to participate actively in the execution of externally initiated development programme. For instance, the need for environmental sanitation is usually communicated through the jungle which can be re-inforced by the use of proverbs.

### Conclusion

It has been observed in the study that indigenous channels of communication have not received the desired attention in the development communication process.

From the study of the various communication systems, findings show that tradition and communication can unite for effective development communication process. Some of these indigenous channels like songs, folktales, festivals etc. can be successfully used to communicate exogenous messages, new ideas and precepts to the people. If these exogenous messages are therefore packaged in artistic forms rooted in the culture of the people, they will have a better chance of getting the desired impact among the rural recipients. In this regard therefore rural people engaged in development activities cannot afford to ignore the media, which are indigenous and familiar to the people. Development communication process can be further enhanced by making indigenous communication systems, which are a function of indigenous knowledge more accessible and thus more effective for development.

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