

THE ROLE OF ETHNO-MUSICOLOGY AND ETHNO-LINGUISTICS IN MODERN AFRICAN COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Introduction

Africa is one of the largest continent in the world and the basic unit of African society is ethnic groupings. The ethnic groupings are not politically or economically independent social units but groups that have a common sense of culture and identity, especially in language and music. To this end, some African arts are found to have value as entertainment, some in ideological significance, some in a ritual context, while some have communication values. Ethno-communicology is the system of communication among and within ethnic groups. As Akpan, (1987:1) puts it, "society arises and exists through communication. Also, communication in society is the key to social order."

The primitive man's first means of communication in Africa were systems of distinct sounds or calls. Each call signaled a specific circumstance such as danger or finding food Akpan, (2000:1). Gestures and drawings of pictures developed thereafter as secondary methods of communication. As call systems became complex, they evolved into languages. After the invention of languages came the use of picture writing, for example, hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt which metamorphosed into alphabets. Through the written word, man was able to preserve knowledge he acquired and passed it on to others. Other methods of communication in ancient and medieval times included bead works, battle horns, drums, fire smoke signals, and music. How relevant these methods of communication are today forms the objective of this article.

Musicology

In African traditional societies people depend on and harness

their environments as much as possible. Africans have learnt to master their environments and the resources of those environments. They have made musical instruments from wood of local trees, iron, stone, clay, gourds, bamboo, bush ropes, animal horns, hides and skins etc. Environmental factors influence the choice and use of musical instruments.

In discussing African musical instruments, focus will be on instruments found in Africa, south of the Sahara. In Nigeria, for example, there are more membranophones among the Hausa and the Yoruba than among the Igbo and the Ibibio/Annang. The Ibibio/Annang and the Igbo have more of the wooden slit drum. As Okafor (1988), observes, "The importance attached to particular instruments varies from place to place."

Age and sex limitations on the use of musical instruments are found in many areas, but due to acculturation and urbanization some instruments formerly regarded as male instruments are now played by women. For example, among the Ibibios, Annangs and Igbo, the clapperless bell known as "*nkokorok*" in the Annang language, which is a male instrument, is very popular with Annang women in Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Even when the same instrumental types are found elsewhere, they may not be used in exactly the same way.

Although African musical instruments are used primarily for making music, they also perform some other special functions in society. They are in daily use for communication, rituals, masquerading, maiden dance, war dance, acrobatic displays, vocational dance, cult dance, recreative and ceremonial dance.

It is not always that African musical instruments only produce sounds as music. As material objects, they perform extra musical functions. Particular instruments may be used in a symbolic rather than a musical manner. For example, the slit drum (*Obodom*) in Ibibio and Annang languages is used in summoning people to a meeting, calling out villagers for a communal work or announcing an emergency or impending danger and for proclaiming various announcements. As Wilson and Unoh (1991:20) note inter alia:

Rural areas have always had a clear-cut communication policies quite articulate and dynamic... from the approach adopted by the operators of our modern media.

Drums are traditionally used for sending signals or messages in some parts of Africa. A signal is a pre-arranged code of drum beats but a message is a complicated series of beats played on drums which imitate the tone of the local language. For example, the Kalabari people of Bayelsa State have a set of drums known as "kule", in which the drum poetry calls out praise names of the leading houses in the communities and always dares them to excel their forebears. This corroborates Wilson (1998:25) when he says:

"Idiophonic communication involves the use of instruments which are self sounding. Among the most important of the idiophones is the wooden drum which is known in South Nigeria as Obodom. The people have the saying that the Obodom is the message bearer of the ethnic group."

In the traditional African communication system, the communication setting is interpersonal. According to Dominick (1996:12), "in this situation one person (or group) is interacting with another person (or group) without the aid of a mechanical device." The source and receiver in this form of communication are always within the same environment, messages are pinpointed to a specific target and feed back is immediate. Baran (1999:9), asserts that "communication is the foundation of our culture." This presupposes that communication is a process embedded in our everyday lives that informs the way we perceive, understand and construct our views of reality and the world.

Africans, particularly in West Africa, share their communications orally, face to face and have shown a preference for this form of communication. They equally utilize the traditional media as a strategy in sensitizing their populace in development. These media include folk media, and these consists of songs drama, riddles, poems and dance. Moreover, folk media are used at ceremonies and rituals and in all forms of entertainment and festivals. They are used to pass on information and the wisdom of

the older generation down to young people. Folk media are often used to supplement the mass media. They are very useful way of transmitting information in an accessible way; for changing attitude, and encouraging participation in a programme. In rural communities folk media are often more convincing than the mass media because they are accessible and they touch people in a more immediate and real way. Folk media are useful because they use spoken words, overcome any problems of illiteracy and focus on local issues, needs and problems to reach more people.

Mukuna (1996) states that "music helps to reveal the extent to which the cultural fabric of African society is reflected." He cites as example, the Akan and Yoruba communities in Ghana, where poetry is recited in a musical form that conveys messages. As Bame (1998) states, "any development oriented ideas disseminated through them are more likely to involve and motivate people."

In his view:

Traditional modes of communication deal with the values and beliefs of the people and this would seem to make them useful means through which social engineers can bring about behavioural changes.

Compared with modern mass media, the traditional media are more familiar and nearer to the rural Africans and for this reason, make them more effective media through which information and enlightenment get to them. Moreover, the trado-media cover all group interests and any message they carry reaches such groups as established communication network of any African society. For this reason, scholars now recognize the advantages of utilizing them in development campaign, mostly in non-literate populated parts of Africa in this modern era.

While programmes and information that emanate from the modern mass media are produced for large and diverse audiences, the trado-media can use local languages to disseminate ideas in a down-to-earth method to rural Africans. This corroborates the study of Morrison (1998) who opines that "communication with rural people via the modern mass media is often problematic in Africa for a variety of reasons such as the modern language used." English

or French is not spoken by a large segment of the population and many literate people do not have the receivers necessary to capture the signal.

Linguistics

Ethno-linguistics concerns the interrelationship between a language and the cultural behaviour of those who speak the language. This differs from one ethnic group to another, including symbolic communication.

Theories and speculations exist among scholars on the origin of language. Bow-wow theory attributes the origin of language to the attempts made by the early man to imitate the common source of nature through the use of *momatopeic* words. The second theory, the Pooh-Pooh, states that speech or language originated from the spontaneous ejaculations of derision, fear and emotions. The third, Ho-Heave-Ho theory, states that speech and language originated from the grunts and groans of human labour. The fourth, the Ha-Ha theory traces the origin of language to human laughter while the Sing-Song theory relates the origin of language to the songs of early men.

Nwosu (1992:44) notes that

Perceiving language as a vehicle or carrier of units of thought... underscores the fact that a very important characteristic and function of any language is the ability to help us convey or transfer our ideas, feeling or thoughts from our "heads" or minds to those of others.

This is to say that knowledge of a particular language or languages eases the understanding of the message communicated through that language. The major characteristic that distinguishes human beings (*homosapiens*) from other animals is the use of language. Individual, community, national and international communication and development is not possible without language. The world would have been a far more interesting place if everybody spoke the same language. There are many different worlds as there are languages. Each language expresses the spirit, culture and world of its users. Each language is adequate to express the perceived significant,

physical, mental, emotional and spiritual world of its culture.

According to Sapir, (1966):

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood but are very much in the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society...

In traditional African communication system, the use of a variety of languages is an advantage in that it brings a whole population on to equal terms of comprehension. MacBride (1980) emphasizes this, saying that "the disappearance of a language is always a loss and its preservation is the consequence of the struggle for a basic human right."

The Western communication system used in modern African countries include books, newspapers, magazines, radio and television films, postal services, telephones, etc. As Wilson (1997:68) succinctly points out, "the oral media system (town crier, meeting, etc) and modern broadcasting systems display operational differences which are culture-bound." For this reason, there is a clear need to view the two systems as distinct operations which can serve traditional African society as well. Probably, it is on this basis that Wilson and Unoh (1991:18) explain that trado-modern communication is the combination of traditional technology and approaches with modern hardware in a manner that both complement each other.

The communication process can also be understood as a media form. For example, activities such as songs, dances, plays, murals and other art forms such as beads, include messages no matter how subtle or complex and can be achieved as media. Beadwork, as African communication tool, has its origin in what is now known as KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Province of South Africa (Search Engine).

Glass beads were valued in Africa because they were products of an exotic technology which are linked to whatever was valued in the cultures of the people who owned and crafted them into a variety of objects based on societal customs. What makes Zulu bead

work unique, however; is the code by which particular colours are selected and combined in various ways to shape messages that at the same time are woven into decorative geometrical designs. The geometric shapes have particular significance and the craft itself forms an intricate communication system devoted entirely to the expression of ideas, feelings and facts related to behaviour and relations between the sexes.

However, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether bead work is a craft, an art or a communication system similar in principle to a written language or part of a symbolic code used for their own purposes. Beadwork, as an art form, has intruded into the fields of social relationships, the practice of law and the communication of ideas. Amongst women, beadwork is also an educational tool, teaching young girls how to conduct themselves in their relationship with males. Symbolic communication in language is indeed indispensable to the making of all but the simplest human artifact Gold Thorpe, (1979:12). It is for this reason that we regard the tools and the symbols as extricably interwoven in the complex whole of human culture. To this end, language and tools are inseparable in human cultures. It is through language that technology is transmitted and developed. With speech and language come the ability to perform operations on symbols like those involved in constructing a sentence. Moss and Tubbs (1991:123) say that "language is by far our most explicit form of communication." This means that language is used to facilitate our thoughts and not to obscure it.

The number of languages used in verbal communication is high. About 3,500 have been identified throughout the world and about 1,250 are spoken in Africa MacBride (1980:49). Attempts to classify the languages of Africa have not been easy because of the confusion between languages, race and economy. Knowledge of most of the individual languages of the African society is still inadequate. However, a study of inter-cultural communication makes it clear that often people are disconnected not because of the failure to understand grammar or vocabulary of a particular

language but inability to understand the rhetoric or point of view of the sender (speaker).

Mukana (1996) gives an excellent case study of the crucial role of language in musicology and communicology. He states that, "an examination of vocal music in Africa reveals that language plays paramount role as a vehicle par excellence for conveying the African philosophy of existence to other human races in the world."

According to Ingle (1972) (as cited by Bame, 1998:54), "in order to convey a message with effect, one has to use language, symbols, and styles familiar to the audience." This is the reason communication in Africa conforms in varying degrees to traditional value systems and in most part depends on group communication. As Akpan (1987:32) has observed,

Apart from the direct face-to-face contact, the rural Nigerian has no other means of staying in constant contact with others.

All these pre-suppose that the interpersonal means of communication system, which is language-oriented is still useful in the modern African communication system in order to carry the rural populace along. However, Wilson (1997:64) notes that "the existence of a multiplicity of languages in Africa is sometimes given as explanations for the limited nature of the impact of local languages in the modern mass media." According to him, "some even argue that such local languages make mass communication impossible."

Conclusion

From the foregone discussion, it is fair to say that man and communication are as old as each other. Man, as an individual, communicates within himself, with the society he belongs to and then to other cultures and societies. However, differences in culture have led to semantic problems. This have been taken care of by socialization and acculturation, which have enabled man to break communication barriers through learning of other people's languages. The village/town crier means of communication guarantees immediate interaction as the audience can ask questions

on any angle of the message they do not understand. Wilson and Udoh (1991) assert that:

The system is faster than in Western communication strategies whose source of feedback may be dependent on the efficiency or goodwill displayed by the operators of the telecommunication and postal systems of the country.

Even though modern mass media systems are not indigenous to Africa, there were certain accepted practices governing communication and the expression of ideas in general, in traditional societies which can usefully inform the search for a role for the modern media (Ansa, 1998:12). To this end, effective communication system in modern Africa requires a multimedia approach, taking into consideration the social context of African society.

Ethno-musicology and linguistics can be helpful mechanisms for utilizing traditional ways of communication to solve modern problem such as HIV/AIDS scourge. Therefore, African countries need to explore their rich traditional communication methods and integrate them into mass communication.

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