Indigenous Communication Systems versus Modern Communication Systems

A Case Study of the Bukusu Subtribe of Western Kenya

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Abstract

This qualitative research attempts to tell a history of a people by highlighting the most life-threatening moments of their existence, and how they communicated the threats to mobilise the people into a common course to either save or better their lives. Through this, the study seeks to establish the most effective communication system(s) to address the rural folks' negative cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and wife inheritance. This will help development communication experts to device and package messages that will effectively target the negative cultural practices in developing countries. Purposive sampling was used to sample three interviewees (traditional diviners who are also custodians of their culture) with whom, through face to face interviews, the researcher obtained data for the study. The study established that rural folks regard modern communication systems as superficial and unable to address their deep seated cultural issues. They argue that the synthetic, glamorous, and vivid yet skeletonic value of TV and Radio lack the naturalness that they seek in communication. To them, metaphors, village dances, and folk songs deliver messages far more effectively. After all, African rural life is largely natural and knows no glamour. For this, modern communication systems alone cannot address the cultural issues. Both the indigenous communication systems and the modern communication systems need to be blended to generate (a) hybrid communication system(s) that can effectively address the negative cultural practices in Africa.

Keywords: indigenous communication systems, cultural practices, rural folks, development paradigms.

I. Introduction

In today's mediatised African societies communication can get as complex as a socialisation and culture promotion tool or as simple as a sending a message to a receiver. Whereas there is no specific agreed definition of it, scholars agree that communication revolves around contacting

and the relaying and transferring of ideas and information between individuals, groups and communities (Olulade, 1988). MacBride *et al.* (1981) define communication not just as the exchange of news and messages but as an individual and collective activity embracing all transmissions and sharing of ideas, facts and data. In this case, communication may be looked at in terms of its being a system or a process. Critics, however, argue that definitions that do not highlight the feedback component do not fully define communication. Okunna (1999) argues that communication is a complex process involving the exchange or sharing of information or messages. To achieve this, communication requires certain basic components including the source from whom the message originates, the medium through which the message is conveyed, the audience who receive the message, and the feedback which is the reaction of the receiver of the message.

Every society has evolved its own ways of transmitting information between its persons and groups. In Africa, besides the indigenous (traditional) communication systems of transmitting information such as announcements, entertainment and persuasion, communication is also used for social exchanges (Doob, 1966). MacBride *et al.* (1981) identified more specific functions of communication as information, socialisation, motivation, education and cultural promotion. Traditional communication as used in Africa is a mixture of social conventions and practice that have become sharpened and blended into dependable communication modes and systems which have almost become standard practices for society, (Olulade 1998). It is a complex system of communication which pervades all aspects of rural African life. Mede (1998) argues that indigenous communication has varied characteristics ranging from being dynamic and multi-media to employing multi-channel systems. Indigenous communication is perhaps the most important means through which the rural folks communicate amongst themselves and with

others. Therefore, despite the advent of the modern day media in Africa, the use of traditional African communication cues is still very much common, adaptable, acceptable and recognisable by people.

II. Problem Statement

As development supports communication, and other forms of participatory approach to development takes centre stage in the developing countries, to help address negative cultural practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and wife inheritance, not much of the anticipated modernisation has been realised. A study into the traditional African systems of communication will help address the inefficiencies noticed in the modern communication systems. A true meaning of the participatory approach would be achieved if information is packaged in ways indigenous people(s) identify with. Such strategies like the type of the opinion leadership used and putting people's needs first in programme development are only but western ways that have worked in some second world countries like Brazil and India. They do not, therefore, guarantee success in African countries which have a different communication setting all together.

Indeed, the negative cultural practices are proving so entrenched into traditional societies that modern communication systems are unable to eradicate them. It will not until anti-FGM messages are packaged in familiar ways to the traditional societies that they will pay sufficient attention to them (the messages). Arguably, rich African communication ways like sayings, metaphors, proverbs, tongue twisters, puns, songs, folk stories, cultural events, ritual practises, village dances among others can address African societal issues more effectively than the modern communication systems.

This study, therefore, brings into focus the aspect(s) of African indigenous communication systems aimed at pointing out the better alternative ways of sharing information that were (and perhaps still are) more effective than the modern day media when addressing deep rooted societal issues that touch on a people's culture. Besides, it will add to the general efforts of African and Afrocentric scholars to salvage the African culture by enhancing a greater understanding of the African traditional systems of communication as well as their superiority. The study will also benefit communication policy makers and development communication experts across the African continent by furthering their knowledge about the communication needs of rural folks.

Hatchen (1971) puts it straight that African peoples in spite of their great linguistic variety are today communicating using predominantly western systems of communication. This, he argues, deprives them of the opportunity to nurture the collective knowledge of their traditional communication. Only traditional diviners and medicine men strive to keep the oral traditions today.

III. The Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1976) which has been employed in mass communication studies over the years (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signoreilli & Shanahan, 2004). Cultivation Theory explains how individuals organise their social reality and make social judgments of the world around them (Perse, 1986). This means our perceptions of reality are 'cultivated' or developed by how the media shape (portray) it (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorelli, 1986). Gerbner *et al.* (2004) emphasised that cultivation is not a linear relationship between media and their consumers. Rather, it is a continuous process among messages and

contexts. In the cultivation study, it was noted that heavy media consumers are more likely to respond to life situations using experiences they acquire from the media. Consequently, Gerbner also noted that using a medium is unique to the individual (using it) because of certain lifestyles and cultural norms. A television program, for instance, can make a person cry and yet encourage another (person) to kill. Still, cultivation is based on individuals' perceptions of the realism of media portrayals (Gerbner *et al*., 2004).

Again, a number of studies have pointed out the importance of perceived realism whereby in order to assess it, Greenberg, Bradley, and Reeves (2010) created a three-item scale that asked TV viewers how realistic the images they saw on television were. Greenberg *et al.* (2010) then developed a positively worded scale. The items on the scale included: 'The people I see on TV are just like people I meet in real life,' 'The programmes I see on TV tell about life the way it really is,' and 'The same things that happen to people on TV happen to me in real life.' Subsequent studies have since introduced modifications to this perceived realism scale. Rubin (1981), for instance, improved Greenberg's scale and included negatively worded items and named it the 'Perceived Realism Scale' (PRS). The negatively worded items were 'If I see something on TV, I can't be sure it really is that way' and 'TV does not show life as it really is.'

Potter (1988) argues that "the construction validation process requires that the important elements in the construct be clearly defined and that the relationships among these elements be discussed logically to establish face and content validity" (p. 23). Perse (1986) drives the point home saying that even if perceived TV realism has some evidence of construct validity, content-specific adaptations of the scale may be a more valid measure of the construct. This is in agreement with the indigenous communication systems which seek to validate messages constructively. Messages that lack touch or are not addressing realities in the rural folks' lives do

not win their attention and are, therefore, not readily adopted. For that, many negative cultural practices like FGM and wife inheritance have not been effectively addressed in African societies by the modern communication systems.

IV. Literature Review

A. The Indigenous (African Traditional) Communication Systems

It is noteworthy that African traditional communication systems have their own uniqueness. They are understood by members of a community. They readily appeal and connect with people's language, culture, beliefs, myths, legends and customs to enhance the effectiveness of communication. They enable the locals to relate with their values, norms, ethos and culture (Olulade, 1998). They also use symbols, values and indigenous institutions which enhance messages' effectiveness. They project African traditional past, derived from the culture, beliefs, and way of life of Africans. Rooted and respected among the local people, indigenous communication systems are embedded in the culture of the people, which is the driving force. They also rely on indigenous technology employing values and symbols that people identify with.

Actually, African communication systems mean the traditional or indigenous modes of communication. Indigenous communication is purely founded on traditional culture. Tradition in this case is the norms and values of each individual group under a particular ethnic group or tribe. Whereas tradition is a bit stagnant, culture changes with time. For instance, traditional marriage has changed over time to include the church, mosque, and Attorney Generals' (court) marriage (Akpabio, 2003). Culture and tradition are interwoven but unlike tradition, culture is highly influenced by the environment. Culture is at times defined in terms of time, whereby it

changes with it. African traditional communication systems can, therefore, be described as that form of communication that has its root in the African environment. It is original in the African locality and to the natives.

African traditional communication has often been referred to as indigenous communication by various authors. In his definition, Wilson (1987) states that traditional communication is a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated by western culture or other external influence. He also stresses that the ownership of the traditional communication media lies with society. Culture, on the other hand, is the belief system, custom, tradition, practices and social behaviour of a particular nation and its people (UNESCO, 1994). Culture is necessary for a healthy society. It is usually established from enlightenment, acquired through education, observation as well as exposure to an environment. A culture can be further defined as the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in a social group learn, create and share. It distinguishes one human group from another. People's culture includes their rules of behaviour, language, rituals, arts, style of dress, religion and economic systems. Therefore, culture can be summed up as the totality of the way of life of a people through which they associate and relate with their environment.

B. The Abandonment of African Traditional Communication Systems

As much as African communication systems are an integral part of the socio-cultural heritage of Africans, civilisation has forced Africans to turn against most of the traditional modes of communication (Ibagere, 1994). This civilisation has tilted strongly in favour of westernisation and has replaced most of the modes in the urban areas with the modern mass media. The socio-economic structure has made it impossible to relate to the eroded modes (indigenous

communication systems) in the urban areas. In fact, an attempt to blow a horn as a communication means in Nairobi city will not be interpreted as a nuisance. Arguably, today traditional modes of communication exist by the 'grace' of the slow pace of development or modernisation.

Since Africa is a vast continent with diverse peoples who have existed for centuries before their contacts with the colonial 'masters,' each of these peoples had its own unique language and cultural patterns within each cultural setting. Over time, there existed traditionally established cultural systems for sharing information, opinion formation and cultural values. Rogers holds that a far flung network of communication existed in 'less developed' countries before the introduction of the modern media (as cited in Opubor, 1975). Even though a good network of communication channels existed in indigenous Africa before the introduction of modern media, studies into these local channels of communication are quite recent as African scholars in the past and (even up till now) have concentrated much of their research efforts mainly on the western media of communication like radio, television, newspapers, magazines and now social media. It is, therefore, no wonder that the quantity and variety of research literature on African traditional communication systems such as sayings, metaphors, analogies, place naming, puns, among others are very scanty.

C. Logical Conclusion

This study's findings logically points at the variety of traditional communication modes that existed in Africa before the introduction of the modern mass media systems. Communication systems which do not take into account the traditional, social and cultural dynamics of society will not succeed in effectively communicating information to intended recipients. It will, therefore, not address the most pertinent cultural issues in society. Modern communication

systems only succeed in alienating the highly placed (people) from the majority of people in rural areas (Wilson, 1982). According to Ibagere (1994), western education is the root cause of this. It has made people regard African communication systems with contempt. The question that remains unanswered then becomes: for how long should this be allowed to continue? Ibagere (1994) continues to argue that modern mass media cannot effectively serve the communication needs of African societies unless they are combined with the traditional modes of communication. Therefore, rather than replacing these traditional modes with modern ones, efforts should be geared towards harnessing and developing both to serve African societal needs.

Ugboajah (1979) agrees with Wilson and Unoh (1991) who argues that the most important thing about African traditional communication is that the audience has learnt to attach great significance to it. Traditional media have a force and credibility to address African societal issues. Conclusively, I beg to agree with Opubor (1975) that African traditional channels of communication represent the most potent mechanism for communication among the various peoples of Africa, and this is notwithstanding the flaws that may be inherent in these systems. Put succinctly, African communication systems can more effectively address the African societal issues and enjoys acceptance in Africa. This, unlike modern communication systems, will help us understand our cultures, idiosyncrasies as well as our peculiarities.

V. Methodology

This study is a result of 18 months of intensive research carried out between the months of June 2011 and December 2012 whereby, through purposive sampling, the researcher identified and scheduled face-to-face interviews with three (arguably) most respected traditional diviners (as per the regional vernacular radio show rating) in Bungoma County of Western Kenya, which

is home to the *Bukusu* subtribe. The diviners' information was got through asking them a set of questions drawn from indigenous communication aspects, where their responses were recorded and then transcribed into meaningful information. Each of the three diviners was interviewed three times at a six months interval but using the same questions. This acted as a form of internal validation. Among the *Bukusus,* diviners and warriors are the most respected in society. This study, however, zeroed on the diviners because warriors no longer exist in the community. The diviners interviewed did not know each other, and the information got from each was used to externally validate or invalidate the others'.

While drawing up the research instrument (scheduled face to face interviews), conscious effort was made to standardise the researcher's questions by ensuring that the scheduled questions are asked in the same way to all the three diviners. In an attempt to ensure a representative sample, the researcher sampled the interviewed diviners from Bungoma South, Bungoma East and Bungoma West. Bungoma North is predominantly settled by either immigrants from the later or by non *Bukusu*-speaking tribes. This provided basis for generalisation in the study's findings.

VI. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

A. The Bukusu Traditional Communication Systems during Wars

Whereas most of the Luhya subtribes, including the Maragolis, Wangas, and Samias, had succumbed to the British imperialism at the turn of the 19th century, the *Bukusus* still mounted formidable resistance. Their first battle with the British was at Lumboka (then a barter trading centre) leaving over 700 British soldiers dead and forcing the British soldiers, led by W.C. Hobley, to retreat for reorganisation (Royal Geographical Society Report, 1898). Prior to the

battle, the Bukusus mobilised and morale-boosted themselves using riddles, folk songs and traditional dances. They also used the same to celebrate their victory in the very battle against the British. The subsequent battles were prepared for in the same way, albeit with each battle ground being named according to the occurrences at the battle. For instance, a battle took place at (what is today called) Myanga, meaning many skulls in the Bukusu language. This implies that many people who took part in the battle died at the Myanga battle field. Kabula is a place named using the word *khukabukhasia* meaning to separate in the Bukusu language. It is the road junction where the British and Bukusus needed to separate the luggage which the Bukusu slaves were carrying for the British missionaries depending on the routes each of the British groups was taking. Mabanga is another place, meaning bloodshed in the Bukusu language. This was named after blood was shed in a battle at the trading centre.

These communication systems, besides communicating powerful messages about Bukusu 'mightiness' to neighbouring subtribes (to instill fear in them), have also left the information to future generations.

Perhaps the most notable of the Bukusu-British battles was the 1894 Chetambe battle, which took place despite the diviners' and elderly warriors' (highly respected among the Bukusus) warnings about the fatal casualties on the Bukusus due to the British superior weaponry. The Bukusus coined a saying, 'We are not pots to break (easily).' This has a figurative meaning, namely that they are strong and will fight on fearlessly. This saying mobilized the Bukusu warriors to overlook the British superior weaponry. Almost all the Bukusu warriors that took part in that battle were killed, captured, or imprisoned at the Maseno prison by the British.

The imprisoned Bukusus spent four years in jail, but upon release in 1897 they found their neighbouring Kalenjin tribesmen having moved onto their land (Bukusuland) to graze their cattle

(and also sired children with the Bukusu wives whose husbands had been imprisoned). The now weak Bukusus could not go to war but instead sought arbitration from elders who ruled in favour of them arguing "The naming of trading centres and other remarkable landmarks in Bukusu language and in accordance to bukusu historical events implies that they (Bukusus) have legitimate claim to the land."

Not opting for war was hitherto unusual of the Bukusus who had initiated and won many battles (some needless) with neighbours. For instance, earlier they had battled Bamia (present day Ateso), beat them into submission then coined a metaphor on them saying, 'Go ask Nakholo (the sparrow), I brushed his (its) teeth.' This loosely translates into Bukusus being heroic and capable of thrashing enemies to easily winning tricky battles. The Bamia actually had to call for ceasefire the last time they fought Bukusus using the metaphor 'to cut (and eat) a dog.' The Bukusus also coined a saying out of the respect they enjoyed from the Bamia after beating them into submission during the battles: 'Khupa Omumia akhulindile kamamela'. This means that in order to entrust Bamia with your finger millet, you must first beat them up.

B. The Bukusu Metaphorical Blessing/Curse

It is strongly believed among the Bukusu community that one day Maina their forefather and leader wanted to pronounce blessings (and curses) to his people, and he did it metaphorically. He told Bamasaba (Ugandan Bukusus and elder brothers to Kenyan Bukusus, nowadays called Gishus), "You, the poles of the roofs of your houses will not burn." This translates to homesteads lasting many years. He also told them, "In the house you will sire sons who will grow to be circumcised." This further emphasised the longevity Bamasaba will stay without migrating.

Maina turned to Bukusu neighbours called Bamia (present day Tesos) and said, "You will never grow chisaka (a type of indigenous vegetable) at your homes, but other people will have

the fortune to grow plentiful of chisaka on your old settlements." This metaphor means that the Bamia people will keep migrating and not practicing meaningful arable farming on their land. That is, the late comers will always find the (Ateso) land tillable and productive. Maina then turned to Bukusus and told them, "You will not circumcise your child at the same place you sired them." This means bukusus will keep migrating.

By extension, this prophecy has been held to date, and is put to test whenever related arguments arise. The Bamasaba have stayed at their present settlement ever since after their (alleged) great migration from Egypt. The Bamia have chunks of fallow land but only lease them to neighboring communities over allegations that if they practice farming themselves their kins will bewitch them (to death). Bukusus, on the other hand, have been wandering in Western Kenya all this while, somehow 'discovering' the white settlements in Kitale (eastern slopes of Mt. Elgon). Many more Bukusus dot Kenyan cities like Kisumu, Eldoret, Nakuru, Nairobi and Mombasa from where they have made their homes.

 C. The Bukusu Circumcision Communication Systems

Bukusu age sets are coined metaphorically with figurative singing to pass the messages about the bravery possessed by the age set members. The Bakolongolo age set, for instance, sing, "The Kolongolo of (a place called) ebwayi ate the elephant while it walked." This is to emphasise the level of bravery of the age set.

In fact, the Bukusus believe that when the legendary man called Mango killed the notorious snake that had killed many people (including his two sons) at a place called Sang'alo (also known as Mwiala wa Mango), a pleased (excited) man subconsciously composed a song that goes, 'Obuyu buyo, wowo haa, wowo' (a chorus with no English meaning). He then advised Mango to get circumcised. The song was sung during Mango's circumcision ceremony,' and to

date the very song is used during circumcision ceremonies during the months of August and December of every leap year among the Bukusus and their 'elder brothers,' the Bamasaba.

VI. Summary and Conclusion

In this study, it can be generalised that the indigenous people in African societies predominantly used metaphors, coined sayings, composed songs and dances to pass messages to individuals as well as mobilise masses into common action whenever need arose. The naming of places according to the events that took place (at these places) was also used majorly to mark outstanding historical events and to pass on the history to the future generations in society. Besides this organised communication systems, the societies established and highly respected custodians of the indigenous communication systems as well as information. These custodians, mainly the diviners, medicine men and warriors formed an institution that was entrusted with the communication function in society. To date, the institutions still stand strong amidst the orchestrated modern communication systems that seek to replace them on pretext of their self-proclaimed superiority. It is also evident that the indigenous communication systems served the purposes of the day perfectly and would still do, given proper attention today.

From the arguments herein, it can be concluded that whereas indigenous communication systems address the rural folks' hearts, the modern communication systems address their ears. Modern communication systems are regarded as super-visual, thus unable to address deep seated cultural issues. They argue that the synthetic and skeletonic value of TV and Radio, for instance, lack the naturalness that the rural folks seek in communication. To them, glamour and vividness uproot the naturalness that they look for in communication. After all, rural life is largely natural and knows no colour and glamour.

In as much as modern communication systems reach vast audiences and can mesmerise, they should be complemented with indigenous communication systems. This will boost the effectiveness of the development models – including modernisation, behaviour change communication and development support communication – used to address cultural issues.

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