

## Review

# The talking drum: An inquiry into the reach of a traditional mode of communication

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**The Talking Drum is an important instrument of communication in Traditional African society which serves as the voice of the whole community and it communicates the aggregate of their desires. The Talking Drum is fashioned to enhance grassroots mobilization for developmental needs of the society. This paper undertakes a hermeneutical study of the Talking Drum in Africa. It argues that besides the understanding of the Talking Drum as the instrument of communication, it can be regarded as a living being. Furthermore, the paper discusses the role of the Talking Drum as a personified entity in African society. The paper states that traditional methods of communication must be revived in order to give room for a free flow of information which is indispensable for any development to thrive.**

**Key words:** Talking drum and traditional communication.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional communication is a vital human activity which touches every sphere of livelihood for meaningful development and peaceful co-existence in African society. It involves the acts of transmitting messages to channels which link people to their languages and symbolic codes through which information are impacted and shared from one person to another (Agbenu, 2007). The inquisitive nature of human beings to explore, socialize and develop has given him the opportunity to interact with his social, economic and political environment. This interaction is made possible only by the process of communication. In African society, traditional communication is the oldest form of communication channels. It is traditional in nature and it is as old as the creation itself (Ayoo, 2007).

Ebeze (2002) opines that traditional modes of communication was the product of interplay between traditional communities, customs and conflicts, harmonies and strife, cultural convergences and divergences, interpersonal relations, symbols, codes and moral traditions. It recognized the existence of traditional structures and the channels of communications used are verbal and symbolic aspects of interpersonal and group communication such as town crier, talking drum, gong, among others (Ugboajah, 1985). The verbal channel of communication consists of spoken words and channels

such as religious groups, tribal associations, market place, chiefs and so forth. While the non-verbal channels of communication includes idiophones gongs, bells, rattles or Arephone, fresh unfolding palm fronts, decorated raffia and cryptic writing (Ayoo, 2007). Memberanphone include forms of skin or leather drum. Some of its distinguishing characteristics includes: the affinity between participants in the communication process, the perceived credibility of source that derives from respect of the institution of the message source, ability of the audience to talk back almost immediately and simultaneously (Ayoo, 2007).

In many African societies, the Talking Drum serves as potent channel of traditional communication. It is the most efficient traditional communication method used in villages and rural areas to enhance grassroots mobilization for society development. Since no development could adequately take place without the rural dwellers being involved, it was obvious that a familiar communication channel known to them can affect this change. However, communities in the rural areas that constituted about 80% of African population have partially being shout out of this very vital process of human development. As such their major means of communication is usually the traditional modes of communication which is the crux of this study. It is the

interest of the researcher therefore, to ascertain the effectiveness of the talking drums as one of the vital channels of traditional communication, its developmental tendencies, and how it can be imbedded into the modern forms of communication of a greater development.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The two concepts that need clarifying are the *Talking Drum* and *Traditional Communication*. The clarifications of these concepts will better our understanding of the issues under discussion.

### The talking drum

The Talking Drum is the cultural instrument which have endured and survived the test of time up to the present generation. The history of the Talking Drum is as old as creation itself. In many parts of Africa, the Talking Drum is used as means of notification, alertness and entertainment of people in palaces or during ceremonies (Melvin, 1975). As the name suggests, the talking drums are thought to mimic languages by closely imitating the rhythms and intonations of the spoken words. The pitches of the Talking Drum can be regulated depending upon how the players strikes the heads of the drums and change their tension. These pitches can mirror people voices, and thus, the drum is called *Talking Drum* (Ushe, 2010). The Talking Drum has historically been used for many purposes, which includes: to communicate messages across distances and villages, bring people together, help settle disputes among members of a village and to serve as memory device to help people remember important events that took place in African society (Nketia, 1963). Today, the Talking Drum is use to praise or curse other people and to welcome guests, praise the gods and people in the society, invoke the spirits of ancestors and deities, correct the errors of the societies, generates conversational proverbs in order to allow people to communicate with their elders and is still part of royal ceremonies or recitals of ancestry (Ushe, 2007).

The Talking Drum is also use during festivals, installation of Obas or Chiefs, naming ceremonies, marriage or burial ceremonies of important personalities in African traditional society (Ebeze, 2002). The Talking Drum warms and limits the Obas or Kings from wrong doings and makes them conscious of their deeds. One of the unique features of the Talking Drum instrument is its ability to closely intimate the rhythms and intonations of the spoken language. The drum reproduces the sound of proverb or praise song through a skilled performers or specialized *drum language* (Nwosu, 2007). The specific pattern of drumming and rhythms is closely linked with spiritual beings or Ogun associated with the traditional Yoruba belief system originally celebrated in Nigeria and some areas of Ghana as elucidated by Nketia (1963)

thus:

The Akan communities highly regard the Talking Drum and his drummer who play the *atumpan*, or Akan form of the talking drum. He is considered the greatest of all drummers because of the breath of his knowledge; the skill which his work demands and the role he plays as a leading musician in all ensembles in which the atumphan drums are used.

Nketia's presentation above indicates the fact that the Talking Drum is frequently understood by a knowledgeable audience and they have the abilities to move people to actions in African society.

### Traditional communication

The word communication denotes a source and extension of imagination in forms that can be learned and shared. It is the production, perception and understanding of messages about what is happening or is about to happen or has already happened (Ayoo, 2007). On the other hand, the word *traditional* refers to a system that is old, naïve, archaic, indigenous and unmodified (Ushe, 2010). Traditional communication therefore refers to:

The process of dissemination of information, ideas and attitudes by certain specialized institutions set up for that purpose. It focuses on the exchange of information or messages that have traditional undertones (Nwosu, 1990).

Traditional communication was an important activity which touches every sphere of human life, bringing people, cultures, communities and races closer for meaningful development and peaceful co-existence (Bello, 1991). It is the process of social interaction that helps people to understand themselves and live harmoniously as organized people of a given state, country or nation (Melvin, 1975). Nwosu (1990) further defines traditional communication as:

A process that uses signs, symbols and other means to bring about inter-exchange of thoughts, and meaning between and among individuals and groups for a better understanding and relation.

Traditional communication was the only process that elevated human beings above all God's creation on earth (Folarin, 1998). God himself use it at various times when He communicated effectively with the children of Israel, using signs such as pillar of clouds, light, and so forth. It is a potent and efficient channel of communication used in pre-literate society and it is still relevant in contemporary time. Hence, Ebeze (2002) describes Traditional communication as:

The product of interplay between traditional communities, customs and conflicts, harmonious and strife, cultural convergences and divergences, interpersonal relations, symbols, codes and moral traditions. It recognizes the existence of traditional structures and channels of communication used as verbal and symbolic aspect of interpersonal and group communication such as town crier, drum, gong and so forth.

### **Traditional communication in African worldview**

Traditional communication is important information dissemination in Africa and other parts of the world. Ayoo (2008) asserts that traditional communication is made up of diverse channels which have continued to exist in the contemporary African society. Some of these channels include: town criers, gunshots, drawing on the cave walls, thick cloud smoke and Talking Drum. The town criers were used to summon elders or age groups in the society to assemble at the village square for some social or political activities (Finnegan, 1979). The town crier had some unique messages which not many people could understand their meanings, except the indigenes of the societies concerned. In Igbo society, for example, town criers disseminated their messages in the nights, mornings or afternoons, depending on when it was seen as convenient (Nkotia, 1963). The town criers method of traditional communication is criticised by people in modern times because of its small area of coverage which can hardly go beyond three villages at times.

Gunshot has a wider coverage more than town criers and was used to announce the death of very important political and religious leaders in African societies (Beltran, 1974). They were also used to announce the final trauing of new rulers, remind the people of an impending danger and summoning emergency meeting to take urgent decisions on issues demanding immediate attention in African traditional society. Among the Tiv, Idoma and Jukun, for example, gunshots played political, religious and social functions of announcing the completion of final burial formalities of every important or elderly person in the society (Ushe, 2010). The only problem with gunshot method of traditional communication was that it has numerous reasons for which it is shot and this becomes difficult for a person to know which gunshot is for an impending danger, burial ceremony, or the trauing of a chief since the meaning of each gunshot is not clear enough until one get to where it was short.

The drawing on the cave walls was the method of traditional communication used by craftsmen who employed their skills to give concrete shapes and forms to what animated the man's mind in the process and shirred the imagination of their tribes (Ayoo, 2007). The art serves the social function of relating individual imagination and vision to the common consciousness of an indigenous culture. It also indicates the social and

political moods of the society at the time and creates good historical art-facts (Nwosu, 1990). The drawing on the cave walls method of traditional communication was limited to a small population and as such some of the messages were difficult for people to understand. Sometimes the gunshot attracted little attention from the people. It could therefore be said that the present cartoon and magazines draw their origin from the cave wall drawings of traditional societies.

The thick cloud of smoke method of traditional communication had the message to put across in African society. The thick smoke, on a hot afternoon, indicates the urgent need of the community; while, a thick white smoke, that went straight into the air, indicates that a prominent son of the community had been either killed or kidnapped by the enemy (Nketia, 1963). A village council meeting was therefore summoned immediately through this smoke. The problem with this method of traditional communication was that it was difficult to send a cloud of smoke into the sky when it was raining. It was also limited by the fact that a huge amount of firewood is needed to pass a message across. More importantly, it makes easy for the enemy to know the preparations of his neighbours during war through the smoke (Finnegan, 1979).

### **The relevance of talking drum as a channel of traditional communication in Africa**

The Talking Drum occupies an important position in African society. It is the most useful method of traditional communication which helps in information dissemination in African society. Finnegan (1979) affirms that the Talking Drum is divided into two: First, it could be through conventional code where per-arranged singular represented a given message. In this type, there was no directly linguistic basis for the communication. And second, it used African drum literature where the instrument communicates through direct representation of a spoken language itself, stimulating the tone and rhythm of actual speech (Beltran 1974). The instrument itself is regarded as speaking the message which consists of words. Such communication, unlike that through conventional signals, intended as a linguistic one and can be fully understood by translating it into words and any musical effects were purely incidental.

The drum is constructed in a special way as to give different tones at different intervals and the intelligibility of the message to the hearer is also sometimes increased by the rhythmic pattern, differently representing that of a spoken utterance. In this method there are conventional occasions and types of communication for transmission on the drum so that the listener has some idea of the range of meanings that are likely at any given time. More significant are the stereotyped phrases used in drum communication. Among the Tiv of North Central Nigeria, the Talking Drum is the traditional method of communication that was used to formalize

announcements about impending danger, birth, deaths, marriages, forthcoming hunts or wrestling matches. For example, among the Tiv people, the Talking Drum was played at the death of an important political leader to announce, give special alert, or signalled to members of the community concerning the news of such death. The drum (Indyer/Ilyu) was beaten in the following language:

Akperakaa gba gede, gede, gede, Takurukuu Anyam Adzenga, Won sha kumon ngu van sha kumon u tamen vande tire jighil jighil keghen wangôu ngu van sha kumon u tamen tire kôr un. This is literally translated as, %Takuruku, Tiger cat in the world above wait, attends, Takuruku, Wait for your brother, who is on his way to the place of the great, Takuruku, wait to attend, wait for your brother who is on the way, Anyamazenga, wait to attend, Wait for your brother who is on his way to the great beyond+(Ushe, 2010).

Any Tiv person of adult age who heard the mystical drum (Indyer/Ilyu) played this tone understood that death had occurred in the society. It was a solemnized passionate appeal to the great ancestor of the Tiv (Takuruku) that another spirit of a dead member of the Tiv is on its way to the ancestral world (Adomoku). The drum also helped the Tiv to invoke the ancestors and to make others aware of the fact that the Tiv traditional religion contains the idea of the after-life. This ancestral abode in Tiv understanding is the place where all the departed souls, including other non-Tiv, go after death (Ushe, 2005).

Apart from giving messages and announcements, the Talking Drum language was used as the most common form of expression. Among the Hausa and Yoruba of Nigeria, for examples, praise names and titles of rulers were poured forth on the drum or horn as a way of information dissemination. This shows that every human society has its indigenous and traditional modes and channels of communication which characterise its existence, organization and development. These communication modes and channels form the basis upon which the communities, especially the rural community, progress, policy makers, planners and administrators, desirous to effect functional economic and social changes must first identify such community communication modes and channels and utilize them to provide the people with maximum information about such changes. Communication, whether traditional or scientific, the transmission of information was mostly from the focus point of origin source of another destination which was blood stream of every community.

Traditional form of communication which is mythology, storytelling, song, proverb, artistic, musical, dance, religious custom and theatrical element, pottery, textile and wool art are owned by the society. The village clan heads only act as trustees and heads of the gate keeping process. Even in the case of extra-mundane

communication, that is communication between the living and the dead, the supernatural or spiritual being the mode of communication is done through incarnation, spiritual chants, ritual, prayers, sacrifice, invocation, séance, trance, hysterics or liberation of the head of society. These multi-dimensional forms of communication and transaction have become more pervasive in all African societies. The introduction of western education and Christianity has infiltrated the process of traditional communication, particularly the practice of the sacred drum to the extent that many people no longer cherished their long time value in the society. In some African societies such as the Tiv, Igbo, Edo, Hausa and Yoruba, among others, the traditional practice of the sacred drum has been adopted and conceptualised by Christianity. In Tiv society, for instance, the Catholic choir groups have adopted the notion and composed a Christian burial sonnet and inserted the name Jesus (Yesu) and God (Aôndo) where the name of Takuruku should be as follows:

Yesu Kristu, Yesu tile jigh jigh keghen wan igyô, wan ingyô ngu kôndon sha kuman u tamen mbatyomou kôndon sha kumon u tamen mbatyomou cii ve kegh un gbenda mbajigh jigh cica ve kegh un gbenda. Which means, Jesus Christ, Your son is on his way Jesus Christ, wait, attend to your brother your brother is ascending to the Great high way, let all angels welcome him, let all Saints welcome him (Ushe, 2010).

This fact indicates that the process of religious change has occurred in Tiv indigenous religion and cosmology, which has experienced a radical conceptualisation into Christianity. Among the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, the Talking Drum is personified as human being. Thus, on certain public occasion& personal names, genealogies and unique characteristics of people are expressed in drum language. Sometime, the full name of a man could be %the spitting cobra whose virulence never abates, like son of the bad spirit with the spear+ (Ushe, 2007). Kombol (2001) affirms that when an African man hears his name drummed or praised in song he must jump up for joy even from his sick bed. Ayoo (1991) corroborated that drummed songs can be used to report, comment on current affairs, propaganda and to reflect or mould public opinion in traditional African society.

The drummed songs package messages in culturally acceptable and persuasive formats and deliver the information on a popular medium of communication. Nketia (1963) explained further that drummed song& maker could use his singing power to make even an ugly woman to feel beautiful and a beautiful woman of feel ugly. Such was the power that the Talking Drum as mode of traditional communication had as a personified being and because of that African people feared to reject a song maker request, even for marriage+ Finnegan (1977) asserts that drummed songs represent an indirect way of

traditional communication with someone in power. The drummed songs also represent an attempt to influence while at the same time avoiding the open danger of speaking directly. The conventionality of the songs makes it possible to indicate publicly what could not be said privately or indirectly to a man's face. In this connection therefore, human songs represent a powerful method of traditional communication in which resistance to public policies is registered and the mobilization for certain things is made easier. The drummed songs played two major functions which include that of propagation or image daunting and mobilization for political activities or support. Songs are also used to reduce the political influence of opponents and to increase the level of solidarity within the conflicting.

Even in agrarian African communities, songs were used on the farm in order to increase the speed of work and avoid unnecessary division of attention. The use of songs however, has been either positive or negative, depending on side from where one is coming. Even in contemporary era, Adeiyongo (1988) opines that songs have continued to play significant role in the process of traditional communication and mobilization. In his own word:

Songs such as eulogy and panegyric were also used to express the dreadfulness of death, the menace of witchcraft and the craftiness of the witches/wizards who kill people who are useful. The singer laments that if such a richly endowed person dies, which else shall be generous to open his money bag for him, a poor singer, to draw money at will.

The philanthropic tone of the songs sometimes comes out clearly as expressed by a famous Tiv eulogist, Mr. Obadiah in the following presentation:

Gbo gba! Mta inyamikume ivan iyol, me leva meg her I miar yam me ter mude yaaya! Kpage Tseun msagher ye, Yaaya nam ikondo er mta uya! Yaaya nam inyaregh!, which means, Gbogbo! I have shot a game with an arrow!; let me hail the person to disable it. I am rejoicing because my flute has eulogised, munde Yaaya kpage Tseun Yaaya gave me a sac-clothe to lie around my stomach! Yaaya gave me a wristwatch; Yaaya gave me money! (Ushe, 2005:46-47).

In songs such as exemplified above, the singer drives home the importance of dirges and its adverse effects on the society in contemporary times. This clearly shows that the Talking Drum play vital role in traditional communication in the development of African society. Some of these roles include: First, it paves way for socialization which is itself a process and experience that helps individual to become sensitive to the expectations of others and to accept the values of one's family and culture (Harris, 1968). Second, it provides common front

of knowledge which helps people to operate and interact freely since they are sub-groups that exist in each community, thereby quick acceptance and quick development. Third, good method of traditional communication creates a fertile ground for the emergence of good and people oriented development (Ayoo, 2007). Fourth, it is through precise traditional communication methods that the intentions and directions of society programmes can be understood (Ikenga-Metuh, 1981). Fifth, traditional methods of communication stores up and promote cultural heritage of the people (Schalz, 1994).

These cultural futures mobilize and motivate people by disseminating and propagating ideas which promote society pride, solidarity and unity. Sixth, through the concrete feedback system, traditional modes of communication promote debate and discussion forum where the rural dwellers interact with their agents, age grades, chiefs, among others. This forum allows the rural to interact with the rule educating them of their policies and listening to their aspiration, opinion, objection and programme (Abubakar, 1989). This forum of interactive process paves way for mobilization which is unified into a common goal. Fourth, formal education becomes easy with the use of traditional channels of communication. The educational agents make use of local print and electronic media such as; rural news papers, town criers, talking drums, among others and anchoring special national programmes such as; immunization of children against deadly diseases, improved agriculture and the likes. This stimulates participation and provides opportunity for diversified cultural expressions which are unified into a common goal. Thus, for traditional communication to flow, language of the people must be given consideration. As Abubakar (1989:94) noted:

Language is a powerful instrument used to keep alive and pass on society's heritage of oral tradition and a symbol for identity. It remains the major factor in solving the complex and various requirements of modern communication needs because language is a powerful instrument in development. People go on well quite easily with those who seek their language even though may not belong to the same community. So the most devastating thing to befall a community is to deprive the members of using their language by imposition of foreign language which is alien and distant from them in space and culture. For this is tantamount to genocide.

Abubakar's presentation above indicates the strength of the Talking Drum as traditional mode of communication which lays in the use of the people's language. From time immemorial to contemporary times, people have used languages in traditional communication to transmit information from one community to another. This has helped in enhancing unity and peaceful co-existence among people in African society in

contemporary time (Bello, 1991).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper has successfully discussed the Talking Drum as the channel of traditional communication in Africa and other parts of the developing countries. This channel of communication has been refined and enhanced for better productivity in the society. The talking drums have also been used as personified beings with names, songs and language to translate information to members of a given society. Even with the invasion of modernism and forces of social change the different methods of traditional communication are still use by people to bridge the gaps in the rural and urban areas.

This form of traditional communication paves way for interactive process and mobilization which to large extent leads to society's development. Based on the above facts, the paper recommends, among others, the followings:

- (i) There is need to refined and modified the Talking Drum as traditional method of communication in order to enhance development in the society.
- (ii) The Talking Drum as traditional mode of communication should be given high level of literacy in the rural areas to bridge communication gaps between the village and urban dwellers.
- (iii) Modern means of communication such as microphones, radio, television, newspapers and the like should be introduced to replace traditional channels of communication such as the Talking Drum, gunshot, song, and thick cloud of smoke in Africa and other parts of the developing countries.
- (iv) There is need to overhaul traditional channels of communication such as gunshot, the Talking Drum and song which were limited in coverage and easily affordable to allow grassroots information dissemination in the society.

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