Leaf as a Communicative Element in Selected Nigerian Cultures

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Abstract

There is no doubt that modern communication technologies are pervasive and have become a global phenomenon; nevertheless the rate of technological development differs among various regions of the world. In some parts of the world, particularly Africa, traditional modes of communication do not only exist, but they flourish in some quarters and remain relevant and significant, even in contemporary times. This article attempts to explore how one of such traditional channels of communication: leaf is currently used among three tribes in Nigeria. It is interesting to note that up till now, a leaf, whether fresh or dry, serves several communication functions in this part of the world. These are discussed here under two major headings of news/information and advertising. The article also argues that the use of traditional communication systems is evidently not the exclusive preserve of Africa as attested to by some practices elsewhere in the world. It is important to note that traditional channels of communication are used not simply because of poverty of the users but they are target audience driven and have the advantages of immediacy, cost effectiveness and being culture specific to reach immediate audience in the locality.

Key words: Leaf, communicative element, visual communication, Nigerian cultures, traditional media.

Introduction

While modern communication technologies are pervasive and have become a global phenomenon, the rate of technological development differs among various regions of the world. In some parts of the world, particularly Africa, traditional modes of communication not only exist, but they flourish in some quarters and remain relevant and significant, even in contemporary times

The argument as to whether traditional media of communication have any relevance in the modern age would certainly range on for quite some time. Oso (2008, p.xi) in a foreword to Ogwezzy Abigail's *African communication systems: concepts, channels and messages,* throws a poser in this direction that "it is not out of place to ask for the relevance of African Communication Systems as an area of scholarly attention in a globalizing world. In today's world, information and communication technologies (ICTs) seem to have taken over the communication landscape and thus render our traditional system of communication not only obsolete but irrelevant". Oso, however, admits that in view of the level of development of Africa, there was still a place for the traditional communication systems in the life of the people which equally deserves some academic attention. Ibagere (1994) in Ogwezzy (2008, p.25) seems to provide a ready answer to Oso's poser that "the modern mass media, however, cannot serve fully the communication needs of Africa, unless they are combined with the traditional modes of communication. Therefore, rather

than supplanting these traditional modes, efforts should be geared towards harnessing and developing them to serve our information needs in general".

The argument supporting the irrelevance of traditional communication systems in modern times appears not weighty enough partly because while the song of their supposed obsolesce rents the air, there seems to be some phenomenal evidence of their application in different cultures across the globe. Or else, how does one explain the current use of ashes of cremated corpses among the Indians dispatched even by mail to relatives far and near as a means of announcing the death of a family member? What of the Catholic Church which announces the successful election of a new pontiff through the release of smoke in the chimney of St. Peter Basilica in Rome before the mass media would break the news? At the international level, a white pigeon or dove is understood to signify peace and these (pigeons/doves) are usually released in a symbolic manner on World Day of Peace celebrated every September 21. Certainly, the people and events mentioned above are outside the shores of the African continent.

In the same vein, colours convey different significant meanings across cultures globally. For instance, white is generally taken to symbolize purity; red signals danger while black is for unpleasant experiences in most cultures. This must have informed the assertion of Asemah (2011, p.316) that "colour is a vital means of communication which we use to communicate definite messages either through the choice of clothes we wear or outright body decoration". A common practice today is body painting in which people rub their skins with tribal, corporate and national colours during celebrations or sports events as if they are mascots. All of these is part of what is generally known as visual communication defined in its broadest sense by Rishante (2007, p.17) "as any form of communication whose messages appeal to the sense of vision….In this broad definition, visual communication is a grammar of conventional and unconventional signs and symbols". Rishante (2007, p.1) posits further that "…in the real sense, visual communication is probably the most fundamental and primitive form of communication known to man" adding that "…Birds and insects such as beetles and butterflies are typically the best visual communicators in nature by the way they employ their colourful features, wings and bodily movements to communicate to one another".

It is interesting to note that at the moment in some African communities, the town crier is still a most reliable means of disseminating public information. For instance in Wukari, a suburban community in southern Taraba State and home to three universities Kwararafa University (private), Federal University (public) and study centre for the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) the town crier plays a cardinal role in announcing public information. Here, the town crier uses a loud hailer/megaphone and either rides on a bike or is driven in a car while making the announcement in the local languages (Hausa and Jukun) used in the community interspersed with English. This method of information dissemination became handy during the spate of religious crises that hit the town between 2013 and 2015 especially when a curfew was imposed in the town. Almost every morning and evening, the town crier was on duty giving the latest directive from the military who

had taken over the security of the town following the curfew. The absence of television and radio services in Wukari has made this communication strategy indispensable.

In this paper therefore, effort is made to examine the place of one of the traditional modes of communication in the cultures of three selected tribes in Nigeria Jukun, Kanuri and Tiv. The Jukuns are found in Taraba, Nasarawa, Benue, Plateau and Cross River States while the Kanuris are mainly in Borno and Yobe States and the Tivs are in Benue, Taraba, and Nasarawa States. These three tribes have some things in common culturally speaking and one of such is the use of leaf (particularly green leaf) as a means of communication even up till date. The different areas in which this mode of communication is applicable are identified and analyzed. The essence of this paper is to demonstrate that in spite of the modern age, some cultural communication devices still play cardinal role in the way people live daily in this part of the world. In sum, the discourse attempts to challenge the notion that African communication systems are old and irrelevant in contemporary settings.

Theoretical Framework
This paper is anchored in symbolic interaction theory which, according to Asemah (2011, pp.208-209), explains "the process through which people interpret the symbols used by interaction partners with the understanding that their own actions are based on such representations, interpretations and or situation definitions". The theory indicates that people are motivated to act based on the meanings they assign to people, things and events. This aligns with the assertion of Folarin (1998, p.13) that meanings in any communication encounter reside in individuals engaged in the communication process and not necessarily in the symbols used.

Asemah (2011, p.208) writes that symbolic interaction theory comes from the socio-cultural perspective in that it relies on the creation of shared meanings through interaction with others. This is in line with the tenet of the communication model of Wilbur Schramm (1954) that communication can only occur when the participants operate in shared "fields of experience" (cited in Tosanwumi, 1994, p.15). Significantly, the major assumptions of the symbolic interaction theory related to this article as noted by Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008) cited in Asemah (2011, pp. 209-210) include the following:
a)   Communication occurs through the creation of shared significant symbols
b)   People give things meaning and the meaning controls their behaviours towards those things
c)   Meaning and social reality are shaped from interactions with others and that some kind of shared meaning is reached.

This theory offers a plank for examining the communicative functions of leaf in some cultures in Nigeria. There is no doubt that people are able to use leaf as a symbol of communication because there are previously agreed upon codes among the people using it which help them to assign and understand the meanings attached to leaf as an object. In this case, this theory provides insight into how leaf becomes significant as an element of communication among the tribes identified in this paper.

Literature Review

Arguments have been advanced academically about the veritable nomenclature for and relevance of traditional communications systems. Some contend that since traditional media are used across the world, they should be labeled as such to earn them a global appeal by just classifying them as simply 'traditional' in line with their nature instead of tying such media down to a particular set of people and geographical area [see for instance an edited volume titled *Global Indigenous Media* by Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart as cited in Ojebode (2012)]. The perspective of the above scholars tends to denigrate the suitability of a phrase such as *African communication systems* used to describe the traditional channels of message dissemination in this part of the world and which makes them look like the exclusive preserve of Africa. Proponents of this view hold that traditional communication modes are used by people in different socio-cultural contexts the world over. For this reason, traditional communication systems could just be referred to as indigenous communication systems or indigenized or boundless media anywhere they are used.

Nevertheless, the concept of indigenized media as expounded by Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart appears to be slightly incongruent with the ideas of the Afro-centric scholars of traditional media like Doob (1961), Ugboajah (1985), Ansu-Kyeremeh (2005), and Wilson (1987, 2005) among others cited in Ojebode (2012). A major difference between these two schools of thought is that while the Euro-centric scholars like Pamela Wilson think traditional media should be better christened indigenized media because they are modern mass media that are cannibalized by locals to achieve their communication ends, the Afro-centric group sees traditional media from the perspective of indigenous media which have defied and survived the sweeping wave of western influence and corruption and are still in use by the African people. Incidentally, the Afro-centric scholars, while acknowledging the inadequacies of the folk media in meeting the present day information needs of the people, advocate a synergy between the indigenous communication systems and the modern mass media. This sort of triangulation could be seen in the adaptation of folklore into broadcasting as in story telling on television/radio, use of traditional costumes and artifacts in film and greater adoption of local language use in the media. In view of this fact, there seems to be some convergence in how both schools of thought drive their intellectual exploration of the field of traditional media. What the Eurocentric scholars see in traditional media as the ability of indigenous people to utilize modern mass media in meeting their communication needs in their own unique ways is already being achieved through the integrationist advocacy of the Afro-centric scholars. Therefore, the dialectics on which school of thought is on the right academic track in the study of traditional communication systems is of tangential significance.

Still on the relevance of traditional communication in the contemporary times, another school of thought believes that traditional communication systems or by whatever name they are known are simply outdated and should be *museumised* since they could only serve as reminiscence of our ancient past (see Ibagere, 1994 for a counter argument on this view). Perhaps unnoticed by such thinkers is the glaring infiltration and adaptation of

traditional modes of communication into Africans' modern ways of life including the mass media systems as stated above. In Nigeria for example, most broadcast stations in the country have their sign tunes carved from a blend of traditional musical renditions in the form of instruments and lyrics. In particular, the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) have sign tunes composed from a euphony of traditional instruments like flute, drums, *Kakaki,* among others which were picked from the heterogeneous cultural foundations of the Nigerian society. In recent times, NTA has mandated its network news casters at nine in the evening to wear indigenous attires on set. Needless to say that traditional attire is a veritable medium of projecting one's culture to the world and a useful tool of traditional communication of identity, status and responsibility. Kombol (2005, p.26) has noted rightly that "There is no limit to the elements in various communities that are a part and parcel of this mode of communication".

There is still a third school of thought that emphasizes the relevance of traditional communication systems stressing that a triangulation between the traditional and modern communication systems should be desired instead of discarding one for the other. This has been canvassed theoretically as media integration a hybridization of the two communication systems as described in the foregoing. For example, the antics of the village broadcaster the town crier could be integrated into television and even online news casting which would show case his regalia and traditional method of information delivery. It is believed that this could make such a programme more interesting, fascinating and culturally relevant to the target audience particularly ruralites.

With regards to objects being used as communication tools, there is every need to consider visual communication as a platform upon which this communication mode is rooted. Asemah (2011, pp.296-297) observes that "Visual communication seeks to relate the visual and concrete aspects of life to communication" and goes on to describe it "as any information that is transmitted through the power of the visuals to appeal to the sense of sight, but, with the intention of creating a meaning". Rishante (2007, p.18) says that visual communication is limited to the standardization of signs and symbols which have found widespread application in diverse societies, cultures and professional settings. In his view, prominent among those conventions are traffic signs, isotopes, industrial signs/symbols, electronic and print media icons which have found universal applications. Quoting Rishante (2007), Asemah (2011, p.298) notes that "In a similar manner, signs and symbols also have the capacity to evoke emotional sensations beyond their conventional attribute. For example, a simple red cross is a universally recognized symbol associated with a hospital, but, it also has the capacity to arouse those unpleasant feelings associated with hospital casualties, blood, sickness and even death. Asemah further avers that the application of visual communication is predicated on *Semiotics,* a science of signs, which defines the elements that work together to produce meanings. According to him, the word semiotics as coined by an American philosopher, Charles Sander, could be interchangeably used with *semiology* which was first used by Swiss linguist, Ferdinand Desaussure.

Ella (2000) cited in Asemah (2008, p. 298) identifies *signifier, signified* and *sign* as the elements used in studying semiotics [italics mine]. The sign links the material vehicle or a signifier with the mental concept (signified). The signifier is the object (physical or material) which could be sound, image or printed word. The three elements are determined or influenced by the culture in which they exist. What this points to in essence is that sign or visual communication is culture specific because different signs and symbols could have varied meanings across cultures. In this way, scholars of semiotics or semiology have learnt to define a sign by defining and describing its properties, functions and its process of signification thereby conforming to structuralists' modes of enquiry.

Asemah (2011, p.298) reiterates the idea expressed by Rishante (2007) that a sign is anything that tells us or points to the presence of something while that 'something' being suggested by the sign could be an idea, situation, condition or even an object. The fascinating thing about signs being used in communication, especially in the traditional setting, is that some of them are inherited from age long traditions recreated and used, while others are still being fabricated to enhance better communication and geared towards giving relevance to man's existence (Asemah 2011, p.299). In the modern world, the use of signs has permeated every aspect of man's social interaction from interpersonal communication (like beckoning, winking, whistling, etc), to group communication (such as finger victory sign among politicians and sports people) and public communication (as in teaching the physically challenged and translating public information to their understanding).

We cannot talk of visual communication without making a reference to iconography as part of the communication modes. Kombol (2005, pp.35-36) describes iconographic communication as "objectified communication in which concrete objects are used to serve as a signal and communicate some meaning to the audience. For instance, the hanging of a keg of calabash in front of a house means that palm wine is sold there". He says further that the iconographic mode of communication also involves the use of a selection of plants for communication. Akpabio (2003) in Ogwezzy (2008, p.8) notes that icons are "generally regarded as standing for or representing something" adding that they do not uniformly communicate the same message, and are culture specific as what they communicate is based on a society's history, experience and circumstance, elements, symbols and icons. He observes that people can decode their meanings as a result of long association with their use. Ogwezzy (2008, p.84) cites Wilson (1998) and Akpabio (2003) who have classified iconographic communication devices mainly into two groups objectified and floral. Examples of florals are young unopened palm fronds, Okono tree, Nsei, Nyama, Mimosa (found in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States) and plantain stems. Akpabio (2003, p.26) quoting Doob (1966) notes that in a symbolic relation, the medium is able to suggest reality because, not through any necessary or inherent connection but through custom and habituation, the symbol arouses responses very similar to those evoked by reality itself.

Similar to the above discussion of iconographic communication is symbology which

Ibagere (1994, pp.87-88) describes as the use of certain objects or situations to symbolize something and elicit a particular response from whoever beholds the object. It, therefore, depends on the ability of the beholder to ascertain the true meaning of the symbol before he can respond appropriately. Symbolography, in his view, has its significance in its ability to ensure communication between individuals who may not be involved in the face-to-face relationship at that particular time. He adds that symbolography includes such devices as placing objects in particular ways to convey meaning. Ibagere (1994, p.88) gives some examples of the use of symbolography in traditional communication to include marks on trees or grass and leaves tied in certain ways which are used to send messages. He cites for instance, the Isokos of Delta State, Nigeria, who cut plantain stems and stick them upside down to signify the declaration of war by one community on another.

The above foray into the literature on use of objects as communication tool has helped to establish the scholarly basis of this discourse encapsulated in the simple fact that in Africa, various objects have and are still performing communication functions in the life of the people. As noted in the background, the relevance of these objects as means of communication hinges on the present state of development of the African people which makes them rely on what is available in their environment with which they could add value to their existence.

Communicative Functions of Leaf
Across the three cultures identified in this article, leaf, particularly fresh one, plays some significant communication functions as explained below under the broad headings of News/information and Advertising.

a)   News/information function: Almost across all cultures in Nigeria, a green leaf fixed on a vehicle is used to convey the impression that a corpse is on board at which sight, people in the community where the vehicle is headed automatically decode that one of their own has been brought home for burial. However, in modern times in Nigeria, fresh leaf stuck to several vehicles on a good day (not in a convoy) might as well indicate a protest, demonstration, or riot going on somewhere in a locality or a nearby state. Even on the highway, fresh leaves are placed at regular intervals some meters away from where a vehicle has broken down. Every commuter understands that seeing a string of leaves or grasses placed on the lane ahead of him/her is a warning signal for the commuter to slow down. There is no doubt that the use of leaves in this context performs the function of caution sign usually placed in front and behind a broken down vehicle on the road. Here again, the freshness or dryness of the leaves/grasses is an indicator of how long the vehicle had possibly been on the road.

In Tiv culture, someone who was bereaved recently could stick a fresh leaf to his motorcycle or a car as a sign that he is mourning which is akin to wearing the traditional black clothes commonly used for this purpose. This is where the confusion in meaning that is generally associated with the use of objects as communicative tools surfaces. As observed by Asemah (2011, p. 300) a sign, as

part of visual communication, has the capability of communicating multiple meanings as a connotative medium. Just as this scholar has noted, an unbiased observer who is familiar with the use of leaf stuck to a car as symbolizing that a corpse is being conveyed would just be taken aback to discover that he was wrong in interpreting the message. The driver might only be indicating that he is mourning! However, the point must be made that in spite of the vagaries of meanings created, the symbolism of death is the central idea conveyed in both scenarios described here.

In Tiv culture also, a young man holding a leaf in his mouth on a mission would not talk to whoever he meets on his way. The interpretation is that the young man is on an errand for the gods and would not entertain any distraction. Still among the Tivs, a palm frond stuck in front of a house indicates that the family had been bereaved. In this case, the freshness of the palm frond would indicate how recent the event happened in which case, passersby who are familiar with the people's culture and may not have got the news of the bereavement would stop by to condole the family. It is only when the enquirer gets into the compound that the details of the news are given as to who died, when, how, etc. This has been seen as a major weakness of African traditional communication systems because the news is never given in detail until more inquiries are made or when the inquirer gets to the scene of the event. However, on second thoughts somehow, there appears to be a resemblance in this case between modern news casting/reporting in the mass media and news reportage in traditional communication systems in the sense that in modern mass media news reporting, the headlines are given first followed by details of the news just as the details of the news in the traditional communication systems are given on enquiry.

Further, the Christian communities in both Jukun and Tiv tribes make use of the palm frond to indicate when they are celebrating the annual thanksgiving/harvest in their churches. Starting from the evening before the celebration, the palm fronds are stuck, usually in the form of an arc to add some aesthetic value to the environment, in front of the church building. They are often left behind after the celebration and by this means, someone who is knowledgeable in the people's culture could count easily how many churches had held their annual thanksgiving/harvest in a local community during the period. As it is expected, the freshness or dryness of the leaves would indicate how recent the occasion took place.

It is worthy of note that in a similar vein, a leaf plays a communicative role in social interactions among peers in some rural communities in Nigeria till date. For instance, among the Uzairue people in Etsako-West Local Government Area, Edo State, young men/women who went the same direction on their way to farm in the morning but parted ways at a junction would get to know who, between the two of them, returned earlier than the other when a leaf is dropped at an agreed point at a junction. If the leaf is limp, it shows that the other person had returned much earlier.

b)   Advertising function: Among the Jukuns, a local wine bar (Brukutu joint) is easily known by the symbol of fresh leaves stuck into a bucket kept by the road side. This is usually done when the drink is ready, because unlike the conventional beer parlour that opens to business at all times of the day, Brukutu joints hardly open to business in the morning hours. At that time, the drink is

being fermented, a process that might have well started the previous night. The drink is ready in the early hours of the afternoon and this is indicated by the symbol of fresh leaves stuck in a bucket. Any interested person might just look down the road watching out for this symbol to ascertain when the popular drink is ready.

To the Kanuris and the Jukuns, an article for sale is best advertised with a fresh leaf stuck to it and kept by the roadside. Such items could be motorcycles, bicycles, household utensils, etc. In this instance, the point of display is fundamental and that has to be a strategic position where people often pass by, which makes the side of the road a most convenient location. In some other cases, someone usually women, would carry an article for sale on the head with a leaf stuck to it. Those familiar with this cultural practice would approach the carrier if they are interested in the object on sale.

It is not likely that the use of leaf as a channel of traditional communication may be substantially different in most other parts of Nigeria, and Africa as a continent. The fact is that no matter how long the argument ranges, the poor state of development of Africa at present especially in the area of communication infrastructure is a prime factor that otherwise justifies the continuous use of traditional modes of communication. Many rural communities in Africa are not serviced by the modern mass media; a monochrome television set is still a novelty in some places and where it is obtainable, electricity to power it may not be available most times or not at all. Consequently, the rural African resorts to the use of the town crier, market, tribal and religious groups, leaf, smoke, masquerade, clothing, song/dance, among other things to pass messages across in his domain and this has always proved very effective.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis is out to buttress essentially the fact that traditional means of communication are present with us in the modern era. It goes to disprove the notion that traditional communication systems are only fit for the garbage bin since they seemed to have been displaced by the ubiquity of modern means of communication. Undeniably, the modern mass media are pervasive and their effects are widely felt in defining communication patterns/relationships across the globe. The question nonetheless is: are these media available to everyone particularly in the African setting? The answer is obviously no for even where they are available at all, the cost of using them is prohibitive to the African rural dweller. The African rural man is left with the option of making use of what is available to him. The use of leaf as this article focuses on is one of such means of communication the African ruralist still deploy for disseminating information today. Indeed, the use of this means of communication is at no cost to the user unlike the modern mass media systems which attract huge cost of access and maintenance.

It is not gainsaid that until Africa is able to wriggle out of the doldrums of underdevelopment, effective use of the modern mass media by all and sundry would still largely remain a mirage in most parts of the continent. This is where the academic interest in traditional modes of communication arises because, according to Asemah (2011, p.303), "This effect of being able to determine man's response using the language of sign is what props it up as an interesting area for the understanding of man". Asemah (2011,

p.298) further advises that "… to live a full life in any community, one has to be fully conscious and appropriately react to its communicative signs and social signals…." Similarly, the point had been made decades ago by Hatchen (1971) cited in Ogwezzy (2008, p. 24) that "The sheer range of a variety of human and inter-personal communication on that immense continent [Africa] offers a challenge to contemporary communication scholars". If for nothing else, such an academic exercise would provide a platform for appreciating the unique anthropological diversities of the African society as well as the efforts of the African man in his quest to conquer the challenges of his environment which is another way of defining development.

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