

Where is the African culture? Assessing the uniqueness of indigenous communication in galvanising women's political participation at the local level

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Abstract

Indigenous communication systems are essential element of the socio-cultural tradition of Africans. These systems have been used to promote co-operation, mobilization and participation among African people. This paper takes into account the uniqueness of indigenous communication especially on women's political participation and was laid on two-step flow (Multi-step flow) theory. Empirical study was looked into and the researchers conclude that since indigenous communication provides women with knowledge and information on political activities at the local level, it follows that women should be trained with a view to acquiring the knowledge and know-how required for standing for elections or applying for decision-making posts.

Key words: African culture, Indigenous communication, politics, participation, women

Introduction

In developing countries, communication performs a main purpose not merely to enlighten, but to educate with a vision to meeting the desires of the people in the right direction, creating among them the readiness to work in order to advance their environment (Moemeka,2000). According to Oyesomi and Okorie (2013), effective communication which operates in a society through the mass media cannot operate in isolation; it has to operate with the society so as to reflect the needs of the people. More explicitly, Omosa, 2000 explains:

To communicate, there should be proper matching of audience, message and medium, the audience to communicate with or to can be identified by looking at the people's awareness of the topic in general; the geographical location; and organisational characteristics of the target group. There is a need to know the people's norms and values, their traditional communication channels, etc, before the introduction and use of a new channel.

According to Ansu Kyeremeh (1984), the term indigenous is interpreted as that originating from a specific place or culture. This implies that anything indigenous needs to be qualified in terms of its place or culture of origin. Scholars who employ the term "indigenous" to distinguish endogenous media systems of non-western cultures from western mass or modern media include Wang and Dissanayake, 1984, Ugboajah, 1985. Writing from the perspective of Asia, the social conditions of which are in many ways similar to Africa, Wang and Dissanayake (1984) prefer the term, "indigenous communications systems" to "indigenous media" so as to avoid what they perceived as confused usage of terms "folk media" and "traditional media."

The Indispensable Nature of Indigenous Communication

There is need to identify the basic features of indigenous communication at the grassroots levels. Omosa (2000) identifies the following:

1) Indigenous communications are a blend of the most common traditional media and include music (or more popularly, folk music), drama, dance, sign language, drums, and town criers.

- 2) Indigenous media are found to be indispensable in disseminating information to audiences in rural settings or folk people.
- 3) Messages disseminated through indigenous media channels are entertaining, memorable, attractive and more in tune with cultural ideals.
- 4) Messages disseminated via indigenous communication use methods (songs, drama) that are so attractive and entrancing that people unconsciously find themselves adopting new ideas-related to farming techniques, family planning and health without meaning to.
- 5) Indigenous communications are so (undisruptive or) flexible that message recipients can be engaged in more than one activity at a time. For instance, a farmer could work on his farm and still receive instructions on new rice cultivation methods. It could appear that indigenous communication channels are structured to meet target recipients at their most convenient periods or places of operation. For example, mothers are visited in their homes, markets or the village square; children are visited in their schools or homes.

Effectiveness of Indigenous Communication in Political Participation

According to (http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN_OCL/pdf/pdf2),

Indigenous communication forms such as festivals, traditional institutions, folklore, drama, music, songs, dance, drums, and poetry amongst others are dominant sources of entertainment, and they inform and reform social, moral and human values of their societies. They also help in curbing inter-tribal wars and conflicts among communities; promote peace, understanding, team-spirit and brotherhood among mankind. To the rural people, the use of traditional communication to immensely popularize certain government policies whether economic, ideological, cultural or educational is in tandem with their ways of life. This is done particularly through dramatic performances.

There are several forms of indigenous communication. Malinga (1998) identifies six forms of Indigenous communication and these are:

1. Folk media
2. Indigenous organisations
3. Deliberate instruction
4. Information channels
5. Records
6. Direct observation

Folk media are the forerunners of the mass media. Like the mass media, they are used primarily for entertainment, but may also promote education, social values, and cultural practices. Each culture has its own forms such as song, dance, puppetry, festivals, plays, storytelling, debates, proverbs, parades, and so on. In some communities, storytelling is used to transmit information which entertains, educates, and serves to retain much of its indigenous history and practices in the communities. Folk media may also promote the participation of local people in politics especially the women folk.

Indigenous organisations can take the form of gatherings of male household heads to discuss problems, mutual-help work groups, religious groups that meet for prayer and religious instruction and revolving-loan associations that pool members' contributions and distribute them through a monthly lottery. A revolving loan association is an organisation that collects monthly donations of rice to pay for the funeral shrouds of deceased residents. Other examples include associations that manage irrigation facilities and water distribution, mothers' clubs, credit arrangements through which poorer villagers may purchase food from a local merchant, and the network of formal and informal agreements that link traders with their suppliers and customers. Governments often ignore such arrangements and establish new organisations such as co-operatives, training-and-visit extension groups, and irrigation management units. While new organisations may sometimes be necessary, structures which have been imposed have two big disadvantages: they do not take advantage of existing indigenous communication systems, and local people often feel no ownership or responsibility for the new organisation. In political participation, political associations can be organised to encourage women to participate in politics.

Deliberate instruction: According to (<http://www.mamud.com/Docs/>),

Parents teach children, artisans instruct apprentices, elders guide youths, and adolescents undergo initiation rites. Many societies have traditional, often religious, schools. Much of the information that is needed to survive is learned not through the occasional puppet show or even through schools or the mass media, but through deliberate instruction. This is just as true in the industrial world, yet deliberate instruction has received little attention from development specialists. One way in which outsiders can make use of these channels is by training and learning from indigenous professionals, adding to supplementing/complementing rather than replacing the skills of traditional healers of humans and livestock, blacksmiths, and midwives.

These experts can then teach their new skills to their clients and apprentices. Tapping into, and co-operating with, the indigenous experts who already serve their communities will help to reduce the cost of training new personnel from scratch, avoid creating tensions in the community by superimposing new people and staff because capacity already exists, and ensures that people in remote areas receive services that would be difficult to provide conventionally. In politics, opinion and community leaders can encourage and give deliberate instruction to their people on electoral process, who to vote for and who not to vote for. Family network can also be used where the head of the family or a respected member of the family gives instruction on what to do to ensure effective politics in the community.

Informal channels carry perhaps the bulk of indigenous communication. The home, the tea house, the fields and the road, the chief's house and the market - are all locations/places and contexts where technical information and skills can be communicated. Information from such sources, is not orchestrated or controlled, but is spontaneous and informal. Development professionals in such environments have tried to take advantage of informal channels by trying to place messages in the form of posters and radio programmes in areas where people gather, such as mosques, coffee shops, grinding mills, and wells. Outsiders often hope that these informal channels will take over and diffuse the message further once a few key opinion leaders have been informed, but this is not always the case. People must consider a message sufficiently newsworthy and credible, before they pass it on to others in informal conversation; what they say therefore, tends to be coloured by their own memory and interpretation, which can lead (in the eyes of project officials) to message distortion and loss.

In the eyes of local people, such selective communication can however, lead to local innovations and cultural adaptations (Malinga, 1998). Informal channels can be used to encourage people to participate in politics and to mobilise them on whom to vote for. It can be done in the church, mosque, etc. For example, a pastor may decide to advise the congregation on the advantage and benefits they will gain from voting for a particular candidate.

Records may take many forms. In the Western world, they are predominantly written. In Africa, they are generally oral. African storytellers narrate memorised historical epics and genealogies in detail and at length. Candidates who are contesting for election may have contributed to the advancement of a particular community or locality. This may have been documented and serve as record in the community. What the candidate has done can serve as a form of mobilisation to encourage people to vote for him/her.

Direct observation Communication does not have to be intentional - or even involve another person. Most learning during childhood and apprenticeships is as a result of imitation. A farmer may see a neighbour's bumper crop and conclude on the type of variety or technique used through what he/she has observed.

Local people have a wealth of knowledge about their crops, livestock, environment, and themselves. This indigenous knowledge is locally adapted - often as a result of many years' experience - and changes continuously as people experiment to find better ways of doing things. Although Western science has typically derided indigenous knowledge as (being) based on superstition and ignorance, much of such knowledge has a firm basis in rationality. Urban-based development specialists often fail to realise that it is the local practitioners who are the greatest experts on their own problems, strategies, and priorities because the specialist attaches greater value to that which is apparently modern, sophisticated, and scientific. Indigenous knowledge is undervalued because it is seen as primitive, irrational, low-cost, small, exotic, unquantifiable, irregular,

invisible, untidy, unpredictable, and dirty. Technology development should rely on local skills and knowledge, not just for moral reasons, but on the grounds that it is good science (Ogundiran, 2005).

Indigenous information is preserved and adapted by being used and communicated to others. Just as the mass media and other external channels mainly carry messages generated outside local communities, localised indigenous channels mainly carry information about local issues. Understanding how such information is communicated could be an important key to identifying local technologies that can be adapted and used elsewhere.

There also remains much potential for using indigenous channels to carry external information. Folk media have been most used for this purpose, but other less common approaches show promise, for instance, the use of local organisations and apprenticeship arrangements to disseminate new techniques. Exchange visits between groups of women in West Africa have helped to spread knowledge of innovative food processing techniques (Ogundiran, 2005).

It is also possible to use the mass media and other external channels to carry indigenous Information sources, such as extension personnel and local women should be encouraged to identify, test, and disseminate promising local technologies to other areas. Where agricultural research systems are weak, farming systems complex, and local knowledge rich, an indigenous-knowledge-based approach to extension could pay far higher dividends than the more usual top-down methods.

Indigenous communication can be in form of direct observation. In political participation, people may observe a candidate's character and reaction. Some people may have many years of experience and knowledge about a particular candidate in a locality and this will go a long way to help make decisions during the electoral process and to encourage others to participate in politics.

Other Forms of Indigenous Communication

The Town-Crier

Soola (1999) describes the town crier as a potent force in information dissemination as it remains an authoritative voice of the traditional authority. The town-crier is usually an eloquent fellow who understands the community and wherever he beats his gong, heads turn and ears twitch. The people recognise the point that the message must be important and urgent to warrant the dispatch of the town crier. Similarly, Nwuneli (1983) talked of the town-crier model that is used in many West African communities as well as in a number of East and Central African communities as an all-purpose, general-information disseminator. But the choice of the hardware (drums, gongs, bells) for information dissemination often depends on what has been previously agreed upon by the community. Thus, when a town-crier makes an announcement, for example, the death of an important member of the community or a politician, the response or feedback from different village communities to this message will invariably be the same.

Music

In talking about dance as a medium of traditional communication in Nigeria, as well as in other African countries, one should not leave out the role played by music, which usually motivates the dance in the first place. Music, according to the *Africa Encyclopedia*, is "sound that is organised in a particular pattern." Every sound has a pitch, ranging between the highest and the lowest. When the pitch is clear and easy to distinguish, the sound can be described as a musical note.

Music forms an integral part of the life of people in Nigeria. Ekwueme (1995) notes in a paper titled, *Music, the Arts and Communication in Africa*, that music is part of Africans' life from cradle to grave. However, the degree to which music is used on occasions varies from community to community, and the occasions vary too. In encouraging people to participate in politics, music can be a medium that may be used. Music can come in different forms. Dance drama, for example, can depict the importance of political participation. Music is an essential component of people's existence. A musician can be invited to a locality to portray and sing on the significance of political participation.

Music has been increasingly used as a major channel of communication (Ayu, 1986; Musa, 1990; Musa 1998). As Musa (2005, p.25-26) puts it:

The role of music as a medium of social and political communication is most pronounced under circumstances where the people lack access to formal communication channels. [So] Two factors that partly favor the adoption of popular music as a forum for socio-political, commentary include the dominance of oral culture in Africa and the intolerance of the ruling class toward open criticism. Music has been a convenient way for oral cultures to communicate their experiences and ideas in ways that can be easily committed to memory [and easily recalled]. Both traditional African folk and contemporary pop music have consistently served the dual purpose of entertaining and narrating/commenting on events

Drama

Local drama groups provide opportunities for local expressions on a human scale likely to interest a wider range of individuals. A radical change in thinking, on a subject matter, brought to reality through drama, is expected to occur when an individual or the group visualises the outcome of behaving in a particular way. Drama arouses deep psychological and cultural emotions. The use of well-known and popular actors and stars in the local community programmes has continued to prove a very successful strategy almost everywhere it is used. Actual behavioural change almost always requires personal touch, perhaps through an influential member of the community or someone who has experience.

Language

According to (http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN_OCL/pdf/pdf2),

Language is a set of arbitrary symbols, matched with meaning and used by a group of people for communication. So, spoken language is commonly referred to as word-of-mouth and used for everyday conversation. It is easy to relate to most common and most used of all traditional modes of communication. According to Ibagere (1994, p.84), spoken language is easy to understand and is the first, after body language, to be learnt by a stranger. It is usually employed alone but it could also be combined with any other mode, depending on the circumstance [and need]. For example, one could accompany one's speech with music to make the speech more effective, depending on the occasion. However, such combination should be significantly functional in enhancing the creation of the right impact on those who receive the information being passed on by the communicator.

Characteristics of Language

According to (http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN_OCL/pdf/pdf2),

1. Depends on sound for its meaning and the correspondence between sound and meaning is determined by culture (society itself).
2. Language is a structured system of symbols i.e. produced based on linguistic rules. It is articulate, systematic and ordered.
3. It is creative i.e. there is no limit beyond which you cannot use human language (you can use it to write plays, tell stories). The limits of human language are unlimited/ It exhibits displacement. Displacement here means the ability to talk about an event that is far away in space and time i.e. you can use language to tell what has already happened or yet to happen. It gives us the ability to communicate about "the not here and the not now" (Rothwell, 2000, p.91).
4. Human language has two aspects – the biological and social aspects. This means that man can speak many languages according to his environment and ability to speak.

Empirical study of Indigenous communication and women's political participation

In a research conducted by Oyesomi (2013) in four communities of Ogun state, namely Ilogbo, Egba-Odeda, Ayobo and Aradagun located within Lagos and Ogun States of Nigeria respectively, five forms of indigenous communication were identified as being used by women for political activities but the level or rate of use was not the same across the five forms of indigenous communication. These are: Language, political meetings, family network, neighbourhood network and political symbols. The least adopted form for political activities is family networks. This is surprising because it is believed, in some quarters, that women are told what to do politically by their husbands, their fathers and other male significant others. The neighbourhood network as a

form of indigenous communication may not be effective in promoting the involvement of women in political activities. Political symbols as a form of indigenous communication are important in the involvement of women in political activities. This is because there are some women opinion leaders that understand the mechanism of this symbols that could gear women up to involve in political activities. Next to this are political groups. According to Oyesomi, (2013) during the focus group discussion, some discussants had this to say on the different forms of indigenous communication used to influence women to participate in politics.

Discussants in Ilogbo: Women are encouraged to participate in politics in the community. They participate actively. Indigenous communication is very important in the community especially the opinion leaders and political groups.

Discussants in Ayobo : *'Iyawo ati iya wa la won obinrin'* (Women are our wives and mothers). They participate actively in politics. About 75% of women are actively involved in politics in the community. Generally, opinion leaders and their women leader influence them to participate in politics

Discussants in Aradagun: In the community, women do not have access to television and it is only few times that they use the radio. It is only what they have that they use to encourage ourselves. Political meetings are held; opinion leaders encourage women to participate in politics.

Discussants in Egba-Odeda: In this community, political meetings are mostly used. Family members, especially the husbands, also encourage their wives to participate in politics.

According to the Director of Women's Affairs in Ayobo community:

Indigenous communication is very important in a local setting. When it comes to the participation of women in politics, there are women leaders who encourage and influence women to participate in elections and politics, political meetings is another venue. Television and radio have minimal effects on them because only very few people have access to them. In political meetings, women are generally encouraged to take or buy "Aso-ebi", "gele", hair styles, etc, are ways women are encouraged to participate in politics.

From the focus group discussions and interview held, political groups/meetings, opinion leaders, women leaders are discovered to be the dominant indigenous forms of communication that encourage and influence women to participate in politics. They are usually limited to a particular cultural milieu where they are used. Understanding any symbol comes from being part of the culture. "It is the use of certain objects or situations to symbolize something and elicit a particular response from whoever beholds the [sign or] object" (Ibagere, 1994). Symbol includes such devices as placing objects in a particulate way to convey meaning. Nigeria has political parties with different political symbols. For instance, ACN-broom, ANPP-corn or maize, APGA-chicken, CPC-pen, NCP-pair of eyes PDP-umbrella, etc. It is very important for party members to know their party symbols.

Language is an important aspect of political campaigns and an interesting vessel of post-election communication. Language used for communication during political process must be understood by the community. Women who are members of political parties tend to attend meetings where different political views are shared. Family network is another form of indigenous communication were family members encourage themselves on political activities especially during elections on the candidate to vote for.

A participant during the in-depth interview at Egba-Odeda community remarked that: Indigenous communication contributes effectively in influencing women to participate in politics. Women attend political party events, e.g., meetings, conventions, rallies, fund-raising functions, or other political gatherings. Women do register during electoral process. They also support the political party they belong to and support candidates for election by displaying political materials, e.g., picture, sticker, badge or button, place a sign on lawn; accompanying a candidate during a press conference; organizing political events, etc. They support women aspirants too for any political post.

The general view of participants in the focus group discussion shows that women make use of indigenous communication to ensure their own as well as their families' survival and, as a result, have developed a rich communication environment. They have lived creative lives, transmitting culture, knowledge, customs and

history through traditional forms of communication. The use of indigenous communication therefore, influences women to participate in politics. The study however found out that though women participate in politics but they hardly contest for elective posts.

Theoretical Foundation

Two-Step Flow Theory: Also known as the Multistep Flow theory states that media effects are indirectly established through the personal influence of opinion leaders. The majority of people receives much of their information and is influenced by the media second-hand, through the personal influence of opinion leaders. . Further studies on opinion leaders led to the modification of the two step flow concept and an interesting multi step flow theory came into being. It was observed that the influence can be multi directional and it is not necessarily downwards; influence can be upwards or even backwards towards the media as well (Baran and Davis). The influence could also be peer to peer where audience members with similar opinions, share insights with each other. Moreover, the multi-step flow concept was seen as having many relay points, that is information reaching a member of the audience directly or reaching a second hand, third hand or even fourth hand. Many a time, the information reaches the mass audience in altogether a different form from the original piece of information. Everyone who passes the information adds his or her own interpretation to it, giving it a new meaning. It is important to note that both two-step flow and multi-step flow theory clearly discredit the direct influence of mass media because of the extraneous influences, interpersonal channels and social relations of audience members which are often complex, multi directional and multi-dimensional. In informing people about political activities in a community for instance, people may not have first-hand information about the electoral process but they may be influenced by the people around them. It may be opinion leaders; it may be through neighbourhood network, family network, etc. There are formal and informal opinion leaders, and these people form opinions and spread them to a greater audience.

Conclusion

In order to ensure active participation of women in politics, civil society organisations, governments as well as political parties should increase the level of awareness of women by organising seminars/workshops not only in the cities but also in the villages. Since indigenous communication provides women with knowledge and information on political activities at the local level, it follows that women should be trained with a view to acquiring the knowledge and know-how required for standing for elections or applying for decision-making posts.

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