

Communication and Information Management: Akan Indigenous Approach¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of Communication and Information Management within the Akan cultural context. It focused on the issues of indigenous communication and information management and the mechanisms adopted to disseminate information in Akan indigenous communities. The work acknowledged the various forms of communication channels in Akan communities; however, it considered a summary of the role of some *adinkra* symbols and other symbols found in chiefs' palaces such as the *akyeame poma* (linguist's staff), talking drums etc. The study covered areas such as the Indigenous Knowledge Values in Akan communication and information system, indigenous method of communication, agents of indigenous communication and information control methods. Participation of events, observations, and one-on-one interviews, were the main instruments used and uses descriptive method of analysis to assessed the information obtained both from the primary data and from the various literatures used as secondary source. The study particularly, responded to the potency of the values in indigenous communication and information management having a place within the development of contemporary Ghanaian leadership.

Keywords: Communication, Information, Indigenous, Management, Symbols.

1.1 Introduction

In these contemporary times, people are being connected to one another through the technological innovations of mass communication. The upsurge of the Internet and its ability to send information around the world with faster rate (Whatsapp, email, twitter, facebook, viber, snap chart, sms, etc) according to Ayensu (2003), is serving as a passage from one era to the other, and allowing individuals to become increasingly aware of other cultures and lifestyles. Technological developments have not only allowed for the widespread usage of the internet, but also have allowed for the dissemination of information through other channel of mass communication such as television, radio, and newspapers, in developing countries (Ayensu, 2003: 9).

Cultures are said to be created through communication; that is, communication is the means of human interaction through which cultural characteristics— whether customs, rules, rituals, laws, or other patterns—are created and shared (<http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/6491/Culture-and-Communication.html>- Accessed on 09/06/2014). In other words, cultures are the “remnant” of social communication, which without it, it would be impossible to maintain and pass along cultural categories from one geographical location and time to another. One can say, therefore, that culture is created, shaped, transmitted, and learned through communication and vice versa.

Theoretically, communication tends to be explained through many models, which posit a basic assumption of "transmission" of messages from sender to receiver.

Again, it is a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common medium and may include; conversation, symbols, signs, or behaviour. It is also a pattern of the culture of a people who define a particular means of sending and receiving messages across. More so, information can be defined as facts told, gathered, heard or discovered about something or somebody. Therefore, information management involves the collection and controlling of facts, discoveries, and conversations among others from one or more sources, and the distribution of such facts to individual persons, communities and sometimes across boundaries.

It has been observed over the years that modern governmental machinery responsible for the control and dissemination of information in Ghana has not been the best. Upon various levels of departments of information control such as the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Communication, Information Services Department, Communication Directors at the presidency, Press Secretaries to presidents among such offices, there seems to be what I termed as “deficiency of communication and information mastery” probably, these outfits lack indigenous communication and information management values.

This study also assumes that African indigenous knowledge values in communication and information control has rarely been an area of interest among contemporary public/ media relations managers hence its inclusion in a study of this sort. This paper hopes to stimulate interest, debate and further studies on the subject.

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1.2 The Study Approach

This study was conducted within Manhyia palace in Kumasi, Asante region and Akuapem traditional area in the Eastern region of Ghana. However, the issues described are generally present in Akan traditional communities. The study used the qualitative approach to collect data in writing this paper. Both structured and semi-structured forms of interview were adopted in this study. A section of traditional leaders such as chiefs, queens, chief's spokespersons, palace courtiers among many others were interviewed and also referred to works of other authors as secondary source. Descriptive method of analysis was employed to describe and interpreted all the data gathered from the field of study to assess their validity.

1.3 Results and Discussion

• Akan Indigenous Forms of Communication

The word *Akan* according to Danquah (1968) is derived from two words, namely; *Kan* or *Kane*, which means first, foremost or former in rank or time. *Kan* means pure, genuine, clear, bright not deem. Akan therefore means the pure and the first place (Danquah, 1968: pp. 198-199). According to the Ghana National Population and Housing Census held in the year 2010, the Akan constitute about 47.5% of the Ghanaian population. The people are composed of the Asante, Bono, Agona, Akyem, Wassa, Akuapem, Kwawu and others including those living outside Ghana.

The various Akan groups practice some common feature in their economic and political life, and they are identified by the Akan language and traditional political system with the traditional leader (a chief) at the centre of governance (Opuni-Frimpong, 2012: 1).

Talabi et al (2015) have observed that various modes of communication channels were used in the past to send messages to villages during emergency, war time, dissemination of news of a dead person, or even to summon able body men for a purpose. Ghanaian indigenous forms of communication can be said to be the backbone of Ghanaian society because, they represented the way in which traditions, values, customs, have been passing on from generation to generations (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1998: 185).

Ghana, like many African countries has a deep-rooted history of oral tradition when it comes to communication and information. It has been argued that African children grow up hearing stories that they later tell to their own children. These stories are part of an oral tradition that is customary passed on, as such; oral communication is the form of socialisation that preserves Akan/Ghanaian history (Ayensu, 2003). Oral communication includes poems, songs, riddles, storytelling, theatre, dance and instruments, such as drums and gongs that relay messages.

It may not fit the case to say that Africans have no channel of communication before the advent of modern means of communication because, communication itself is a process of sharing ideas, information, and messages with other in a particular time and place (Talabi et al, 2015).

Akan indigenous way of sending and receiving messages differs from that of the western culture. In the Akan context, according to Carey (1992) communication is linked to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association'. This definition by the author, exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms 'commonness,' 'community,' and 'communication' (Carey, 1992: 18). Early societies we are told developed systems for sending messages or signals that could be seen or heard over a distance such as drumbeats, fire and smoke signals, or lantern beacons (Talabi et al 2015: 191-192). Likewise, the Akan indigenous method of communication was in the form of interpersonal communication, special sounds (which include the *gong-gong*, *atumpan* and *fontomfrom*), arts and symbols. Among the Akan, drum communication methods are not just mere languages; they are based on certain cultural precedents.

• The communicative role of Akan drums

According to Nketia (1963), there are three fundamental modes of drumming among the ... [Akan]. These according to the author are: signal mode, speech mode, and dance mode. According to the author, the purpose of the dance mode of drumming is mostly recreational; however, the signal and speech modes are played strictly for communication. The use of drums as a mode of communication also speaks to the fact that "traditional talking drums, mimic the tonal patterns of spoken language" thus, carrying the same characteristics as oral communication (Online Encyclopaedia, 2003).

Nketia (1963) has observed that the idea of using drums to communicate is best expressed by the use of *atumpan* (Akan talking drum). The author describes *atumpan* in the following:

The drum come in pairs with one drum having a high tone and the other with a low tone. These two drums are played with a steady flow of beats, often lacking in regularity or phrasing to mimic the highs and lows of the *twi* language, which is a tonal language (Nketia, 1963: 28).

Drum, known among the Akan as *twene* have been the premier mode of communication for Ghana for centuries. Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998) shares in the thought of Nketia when he writes that:

The drums are made out of different kinds of wood and percussion strings. Not only are they musical instruments but they are used to convey different messages to members of a

community. Different drums of various sizes and shapes send a mixture of messages; the *atumpan* (talking drums), *twenesini* (short drum) is beaten for emergency village assembly meetings, and *asafotwene* is beaten as a clarion call to the *asafo* group to summon members to emergencies such as search and rescue operations (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1998: 189).

Ayensu (2003) recounts that in ancient times, talking drums were used to transmit important messages from one part of the... [Community] to another. For example, in emergency periods such as... war time [s], drummers would place themselves at strategic points, usually on high grounds, and send messages [across via the talking drums] (Ayensu, 2003: 36).

Rattray (1923) has studied the Akan of Ghana and identified drum language as a means of communicating indigenous cultural values and messages. He stressed on his argument when he stated that:

I first became interested in this difficult subject many years ago. At that time it was generally known that the Ashanti, in common with certain other West Coast peoples, were able to convey messages over great distances and in an incredibly short space of time by means of drums, and it was thought that their system was based upon some such method as that with which Europeans are familiar in the Morse code (Rattray, 1923: 242).

Drums as a signalling device work when *ɔkyerema* (sing.) /*akyerema* (pl.) beats a drum in a specific sequence that carries a particular message within the domain of a village, the corresponding message is heard in the closest and several miles away towns which is corresponded by the *ɔkyerema/akyerema* in that town who also sends the message to his closest neighbour and within a matter of time, the whole state has received the message and is alerted on what is going on (Baffour Kwame Antwi in an interview).

The sounds and signals from drums in some cases can only be coded and decoded by the people for whom they are meant. This function of sending messages through sound waves is parallel to the function of wireless, frequency modulation technology like cellular phones and radio (FMs)-Ayensu, 2003: 53).

In recent times the use of talking drums to convey messages as hitherto used is curtailed to technological advancement. However, its use is limited to the palace and any such other traditional occasions like durbars, festivals such as; *akwasidae*, *Odwira*, *akwantukese* etc. During such occasions, the drums are beating to direct or send messages to the chief for a specific instruction to be taken or follow. Dankwa (2004), shares in this development pattern; because of the modern communication trend and the limitation of the use of indigenous drum language/message pattern when he writes that;

A chief sitting in state might be reminded that he has sat for far-too-long: that it is getting dark and he should get ready to leave the scene. [Such messages may include according to Dankwa] *Okuamong ma wo ho bereso: na ade asa okokoo biri*. This message literary translates as “the great one, rise up and leave for home for when it is dark it is difficult to recognize even a light skinned person”. According to him, all these are transmitted through the talking drum (Dankwa, 2004: 87).

- ***Okyeame* (chief’s spokesperson or linguist) and Akan Indigenous Communication**

History regarding the institution of the office of *okyeame* (Akan indigenous spokesperson for a chief) reveals that it is common to the Akan society with its origin credited to the Adansi people (Yankah, 1995). According to Opuni-Frimpong (2012: 172-173), the Adansi kingdom ruled all the Akan states in the sixteenth century until the Denkyira people conquered them. He further states that Awurade Basa, the then King of Adansi, is identified as the traditional leader who initiated the use of *okyeame* in traditional governance.

Awurade Basa as a great and powerful traditional leader did not want his people to talk to him directly. He therefore appointed a close confidant named Mfrane as a spokesperson through whom he would communicate with the public. Mfrane was expected to manage the information to the desire of the traditional leader. *Okyeame* in Akan is *kyea ma me*. It literally means polish up for me. The *Okyeame* with his communication skills was expected to elaborate the short speeches of the leader in order to ensure proper understanding. The mistakes in the messages that ordinary people communicated that could be offensive to the traditional leaders were also corrected by the *Okyeame* as he presented the information to him (Opuni-Frimpong 2012: 173).

He further stressed that the institution of *okyeame* has remained the art of Akan indigenous leaders communicating with others through a third party. Traditional leaders, as well as members of the public communicate with each other through the *okyeame*. The role of *okyeame* is mainly in the domain of public communication (Opuni-Frimpong, 2012: 173).

Akan traditional governance acknowledges the *okyeame* as the indigenous administrator charged to supervise the day-to-day affairs of the state. His role can be seen as the modern day public relations officer at the palace. He is the first point of call when visitors arrive at the palace. This means that he interacts with the visitors, and gives them necessary orientation in the observance of palace protocols.

On his part, Yankah (1995) posits that, speaking through *okyeame* leaves room for possible modification,

addition of omitted details, and the general enhancement of form and content. The author's position is that speaking through *ɔkyeame* enhances clarity because, besides being a spokesperson, he is also the chief's personal assistant [modern day personal secretaries], traditional consultant, prosecutor, and confidant.

He further stressed that the criteria for the selection of *ɔkyeame* include probity, knowledge of tradition, and proverbial eloquence, as well as clarity in perception. According to a Ga proverb, *Ke otsaame mu toipe, man ejwa* (when *ɔkyeame* turns deaf, the state collapses- Yankah, 1989: 335). The implication here according to Yankah is that, being an intermediary and an envoy, he is expected to have a keen sense of perception in order to effectively liaise between the chief and his guests, or the state and other states, since miscommunication between states may even lead to war (Yankah, 1989: 335).

- **The place of Akan indigenous symbols in communication (emblems of *akeame poma*-linguist staff)**

This section discusses the *akeame poma* (the staff) and its role in communication among the Akan. According to Dankwa (2004) the *akeame poma* has symbolic objects on top of the staff, which have meanings and histories that transmit messages across. Its place in the palace proceedings cannot be glossed over. He states that;

When a chief sends a team of arbitrators to go to a section of the community which is plagued with quarrels resulting in dynasty, a linguist's staff with the symbol of the left and right hands, with the fore fingers crossed will be sent to the meeting place (Dankwa, 2004: 89).

The top of traditional Akan spokesperson's staff at any moment is determined by the occasion and the message that the *ɔkyeame* (singular) intends to transmit. The *akeame* (plural) are sent out from time to time as royal envoys and ambassadors to other traditional leaders. The message is therefore understood not only by the words that the *ɔkyeame* expresses orally, but also by the ability of the recipients to read the meanings of the sculpture he presents.

However, there are Akan indigenous approaches to giving relevant information to the leaders in public. The leader can receive the information when he is able to read and interpret the tops of *akeame* staff. The *ɔkyeame* communicates to the public and, or the chief in various ways. He may present a staff with various communicative symbols on top to transmit information or communicate to others. According to Dankwa (2004), there are several situations and occasion that *akeame* staffs are used. Some are gold-plated and others black. The gold-plated staff is used on ceremonial occasions while the black ones are normally used on a more sombre situations. Dankwa stated that:

When a chief wishes to summon an elder who has to be made aware of the urgency of the call, a blackened staff is used. Again, on ceremonial occasions, when traditional rites are performed, the [*ɔkyeame*] carries the blackened staff. The [*ɔkyeame*] t staff [...] serves as the insignia or authority of the linguist. No amount of words from the [*ɔkyeame*] will carry weight if he does not carry the [...] staff [which is the symbol of authority of the office he represents] (Dankwa, 2004: 89).

Some of these communicative symbols on tops of the *akeame* staffs are discussed below:

- **The symbol of a tortoise and snail with a gun lying in-between them**

According to Dankwa (2004), the nature of tortoise and the snail is such that they are always fond of carrying their belongings and frown on war since they may lose their properties. Situating the nature and characteristics of these creatures to every community, Dankwa asserts that;

They constitute the Ghanaian's symbolic gesture in that they repudiate war as a means of settling disputes. Linguist staff with the above top, when sent in the olden days when tribal wars were rampant, spoke the message of reconciliation. The sender of staff was counselling or praying for peaceful settlement of the issue. These days whenever these staffs are sent to a strife-torn area, they signify that the chiefs wish that both parties used peaceful means to settle differences.... (Dankwa, 2004: 96).

- ***tikoro nkɔ agyina* (double headed)**

The use of the *tikoro nkɔ agyina* (a double-headed symbol) explains the consultative nature of Akan leaders. This is shown or placed to a traditional leader in a moment he is considered to seek the opinion of others on an issue before they make certain decisions in public. Dankwa (2004) has argued that, there is always a need for the recognition of the wisdom of collaboration and cooperation, which is communicated true the double-headed staff of the *ɔkyeame*. It literary means that one head does not go into council or consultation. It calls for the participatory democracy and consensus building.

The indigenous lesson here is that leaders should at all times consult elders before decisions are taken. It also means that however important a leader is, according to Nana Osim Kwatia II (Chief of Amanokrom and *Gyasehene* of Akuapem Traditional area) and Nana Baffour Kwame Antwi (*linguist to Asantehene chief linguist*) "whether you are a chief, head of state or the head of a family you must not take important decisions alone without consulting other members of the community or the state or the family respectively" (In an interview).

- **A hand holding an egg**

Another indigenous communicative symbol is the concept of Akan traditional power and authority as represented by a hand holding an egg. It symbolically communicates to the leader that power and authority ought to be handled with much care and wisdom. Dankwa (2004) states that;

The hand holding the egg symbolically represents the chief. The egg represents the whole traditional area.... [Egg as an object that is fragile needs to be handled with care] if he handles it carelessly, the egg will drop and fall. On the other hand, if he holds it too tightly, the egg would be crushed. The message is chiefs who administer a traditional area should be fair and firm. The delicate nature of justice demands that the chief handles affairs with great care and diplomacy and with firmness (Dankwa, 2004: 95).

The above assertion by Dankwa can be further diagnosed from the political point of view that leaders are not supposed to be dictators or weak, but rather must be balanced in order to have successful leadership. This means that if a chief is shown a symbol of this nature, he is to be as careful as possible not to hold the egg too hard or loosely for it to fall down.

1.3.1 Indigenous Information Management: the case of the Akan of Ghana

Authority is respected in Akan traditional communities to the level that, one may have an idea or know about a particular issue, but will never speak because he is not the one to do so. The culture and customs of the Akan indigenous knowledge posits according to Nana Antwi, which is also supported by Nana offei (both linguists) that who is responsible and has the right and mandate to disclose information is respected (in personal conversation).

In Akan indigenous communication and information, there are two important things, which aid effective communication and management. These two things are; what is said and what is not said. What is not said is communicated through symbolic gestures, drum language and it is understood through the eyes and ears of symbolic languages.

In the Akan indigenous knowledge context, one speaks through *kyeame* in order not to committing himself to certain offences. Issues discussed between the chief and his elders in a close meeting do not come to the public or fed to the media houses unless it is meant to be so. This according to my informants suggest that the chief or the chief's spokesperson best tells certain matters or issues—some issues are reserved of the chief himself or the *kyeame*.

Again, when an issue cropped up, the *kyeame* is tasked by the chief to make a preliminary survey or investigation and report accordingly, and based on the report of the *kyeame*, it is there and then that the chief and his elders would treat it as authentic or mere speculations or propaganda (*koowaa*).

The educational value of the above development that needs to be projected is that, as elders of the community, they serve as the immediate overlords the people look up to so when they give information out, it is treated as authentic and has the backing of the leaders. What do we see in today's leadership, especially in our political dispensation?

Again, values such as *ntesie* (I have heard, but keeping it) portrays the maturity of Akan indigenous leaders in the area of managing information to set up a committee to find out the possibilities, the way forward, before they react. For instance, the indigenous wisdom in *ntesie* is seen in areas most especially, when death occurs. They take their time to manage the situation and put in place the necessary arrangements before it comes to public.

The richness of traditional communication in Akan communities is said to be still dominant, especially amongst the indigenous folks. Traditional networks of information dissemination, including folk media, are not only still existent in some parts of the World, but also continue to play a vital role.

Talabi et al (2015) have it that oral tradition is universal among African language groups, facilitating the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. Traditional channels, within the system, have distinct roles and functions; together they interact with one another in the transmission of information and socio-cultural messages.

1.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to show the relevance of traditional communication in the Akan (Ghanaian) society and that participatory methodologies (modern day press conferences and media engagements) were not a new phenomenon to Ghanaian worldview. The failure of these earlier development initiatives could have been attributed, to some extent, the failure of those quarters' (government machinery) responsible for information and communication management to integrate indigenous communication values or mechanisms into their *modus operandi*.

Dialogue and participation were encouraged between the communicator and the targeted audience in traditional communities. However, when mass media was used, the communicator had no direct contact with their recipients. Base on the foregoing, recent political leaders and media communication

development must consider incorporating traditional communication and information management in their quest to improve information management among them.

The way African communities perceived the new communication technologies could also have had an impact on how development and educational messages channelled through them were received. Among the Akan of Ghana, they referred to the telephone as *ahama trofo* (a liar), a ‘tale-bearing wire’, the newspaper was called ‘*Koowaa krataa*’ which means ‘loose-tongued paper’.

News in Ghana is always preceded by a brief recording of indigenous drum sound on national radio and television before the news. On Ghana’s Premier Broadcasting Station and on the radio, there are drum beats. At the end of the news on radio, the drums are believed to be saying, Ghana *mmontie* Ghana *mmontie* (Listen Ghana, Listen Ghana) Yankah, 1999: 8). This is appropriate, for much of Ghana, since the drum has long been an important traditional means of communication.

Bakare (1997) asserts that, the early missionaries were cognisant of the communicative powers of the drum in the African Community, and discouraged its use during church service;

Such is the power of the drum to evoke emotions, to touch the souls of those who hear its rhythms, that the earliest Christian Missionaries to Africa forbade its use in church services, imposing instead the organ or piano, ‘sober; instruments whose appeal were meant to be cerebral rather than emotional (Bakare, 1997: 3).

In African culture, storytelling was an opportunity for the older generations to pass on the values in indigenous knowledge to generations to come. Storytellers, in the process of telling stories, knew at what point to inject an appropriate message. Proverbs, jokes and songs made stories lively and interesting. During storytelling, like any other forms of traditional communication, in traditional Akan communities, had an educative function as well as inculcating indigenous values into children in the most informal, serene way.

The study finally conclude on the note as argued by the F.A.O on indigenous wisdom that is enshrined in the cultural values of many African (Akan) communities to the betterment of communication and information management in recent times. They endorsed that;

Traditional folk media are cultural resources that accumulate indigenous knowledge, experiences and expressions passed down from generation to generation. Woven into proverbs and poems, songs and dances, puppet plays and stories, rhythms and beats, they are embedded with a strong sense of cultural identity that can be a potent force for [communication and information management] development [in Ghana]. In many cases, these media are the traditional [...] [channel] of indigenous wisdom, experience and culture. Constructive use of these cultural resources in [Akan/Ghanaian] communities where they are popular and well nurtured can be a subtle and effective way of introducing communication development ideas and messages [in the development of media relations in Africa] (F.A.O., (1998). available at: <http://www.fao.org/sd/CDdirect/CDan0017.htm> [assessed on 27/04/2012]

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