What My Grandmother Taught Me About Communication: Perspectives from African Cultural Values

Alfred E. Opubor*

Abstract

In this essay, the author examines the roots of African patrimony and its relevance in developing and implementing an Afrocentric theory of communication, culture and social change.

Résumé

Dans cet essai, l'auteur se penche sur les racines du patrimoine africain, et le rôle important que jouerait ce dernier dans la mise au point et l'application d'une théorie afro centriste de communication, de culture et de changements sociaux.

Introduction: The African imperative

Since the human being is 'the communicating animal', all human societies are endowed with a legacy of communication theory and practice. And because communication is the social mechanism for building society, all communication is rule-governed, providing the basis for expectations and predictions of what others will say and do. The rules of communication-in-society also provide a basis for evaluating what is correct or right or good, i.e., for making ethical and moral judgements about communication practice and communication acts.

The underlying basis for such judgements, i.e. the underlying 'theory' is often dormant, unexpressed, and yet very much active in regulating the behaviour of individuals and groups. Cultures outside Africa have developed, codified and articulated these underlying ideas, based on the

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* Prof. Alfred Opubor is with the West African Newsmedia and Development Centre (WANAD), Cotonou, Benin. An earlier version of the first section of this paper was delivered at the UNICEF/UNAIDS workshop on HIV/AIDS Communication in Africa held in Harare, Zimbabwe in October 2001.

the validity and efficacity that we must produce in our focus on communication for social change, including communication to sustain a culture of peace in Africa.

African communication ethics?

What follows is an attempt to sketch an approach to discussing communication and media ethics through looking at the meta-language of a few African cultures. First, the intention is to see whether these African cultures distinguish different types of communication events and products, and how and whether such differentiation provides unique perspectives on communication practice, in terms of ethical considerations.

Second, I will attempt to draw implications from the findings for the international discourse on media ethics, and especially for training of communicators and the development of communication policies in Africa that would help promote a culture of peace and social change.

What is truth?

When I asked my grandmother:' Nene, what is 'truth'?, she burst forth into a song, by way of response, as often elderly women in our cultures do. The following folk song (translated) in Itsekiri, my mother tongue, spoken by a minority ethnic group in the Niger Delta area of southern Nigeria, is her answer:

> That which I have seen, that is what I say;
> I will not say it with fear.
> That which I have seen, that is what I say;
> I will not say it with fear.
> When a piece of yam is planted in the ground,
> The rains come, the season comes; and it grows;
> When a human being is planted in the ground,
> The rains come, the season comes; and he doesn't grow.
> That which I have seen, that is what I say;
> I will not say it with fear.

According to this song, certain facts and events are incontrovertible. Everyone agrees with statements about these facts, because everyone has experienced them. You can plant seeds or cuttings and expect them to grow, and to harvest the fruits; but human corpses 'planted' in the earth do no grow; they just rot away.

Therefore statements, based on experienced (or 'lived') and verifiable facts, are accepted as true. In this sense, truth is based on inter-subjective validation. It is therefore not normally subject to controversy and refutation.

> 'hearing', as in the Igbo proverb: 'afuru n'anya ka anuru na-nti'; meaning: 'what I witnessed with my eyes is greater than what I heard with my ears.'

Thus in deciding on the truth of statements, especially in cases of conflict resolution, the Igbo depend a lot on oral testimony from those who witnessed the event first hand.

Itsekiri faction: 'ita'

Folklore is an important area of Itsekiri oral tradition and cultural expression, as it is for many traditional or transitional societies, especially those still with significant proportions of illiterates. Folk tales, myths, and legends are categories of the oral tradition that are regarded as 'ita'. They differ from 'iyen', news, by not being true or factual in the literal sense. They are accepted as things that may have happened, or that may have been possible, in the dim, distant past, or as things which were handed down from parents and ancestors; therefore, while not literally true, they are culturally acceptable, even as fiction, meaning they never existed, and may have been made up.

'Ita' may be told about human beings, sometimes identified with names that symbolise a significant aspect of their character, (Ajogri 'one who burns quickly, like a raging fire', meaning a hot-tempered person), or about human beings from legendary history, whose names are well known, though not usually from the living memory of anyone alive at the telling.

Berry (1960) makes a distinction between fictional and non-fictional narrative. Explaining, he says:

> 'Under the latter heading I would subsume what has been variously considered as myths, legends and chronicles. They are distinguished from tales proper, that is, from fictional narrative, by the fact that they are regarded in context as true. Ethnographically at least, they are history. Myths, chiefly stories of the deities and the origins of natural phenomena, are especially important throughout West Africa....' Berry also speaks about 'Legends which recount the origins of families and clans and explain the ritual and taboos of the ancestral code...told only for instruction within the group, and rarely to outsiders...'

What seems to be important for 'ita', is their moral validity, based on the moral lesson they are expected to teach. Therefore at the end of every 'ita', there is usually a didactic formulaic statement: 'that is why our people say that... (it does not pay to be greedy). In such versions, 'ita' belongs to Berry's 'fictional' category, which includes 'serious explanatory and moralizing tales, humorous trickster, and tales developed wholly or essentially in human society'. We may also call them 'editorialising' stories.

Usually, such an answer would be enough for the questioner, and no further source identification would be required. There is no intention here of protecting the source; though confidentiality is recognised and cherished in another context.

However, there are statements which are attributed to unidentified sources: 'they say/said....' These types of statement seem to be suspect in many people's view; and if a person is perceived as fond of making such vaguely attributed statements, especially if they concern uncomplimentary information or news about other persons and their character or situation, that reporter/speaker may become guilty of what the Yoruba call 'nwon ni nwon ni', which means, 'they said, they said'.

This is the same expression that the Yoruba use for 'rumour'. They regard a rumour as a statement that is attributed to a general, unspecified source, possibly fictitious. Among the Igbo, the expression for 'rumour mongering' is 'igba asili', meaning "circulating 'they said'". Therefore a rumourmonger has low credibility because his allegations or accusations are not seen as authenticated by possible nameable sources. Often the rumourmonger is challenged. A famous saying in West African pidgin English makes the point: 'Dem say, dem say; who say?'

Usually the person asked cannot name anyone; or, to increase their credibility, they may be forced to lie, and to name someone, to accuse someone falsely of being the source of the information whose veracity had been suspected.

Lies, damn lies

A lie is deliberate falsehood; saying something that is not true. In Itsekiri, 'ita ekun' means ' a vain or unjust story'. The liar cannot be trusted; and trust is seen as being at the centre of good social relations. A lie can be the falsification of fact; as the Itsekiri would say, 'presenting something which is black and saying that it is white'. Lying is not making a factual error; it is deliberately misleading others through changing facts, or creating 'facts that do not exist'. The lie cannot be corroborated by the evidence and experience of others; it is not like truth that is common knowledge. In fact, a lie is regarded as contra-factual.

Usually, a lie is directed at another; to undermine them or to gain advantage over them. The notion of injustice is dominant in perceptions of lie telling. There is sympathy for the 'victim' of the lie, as of an injustice; the person lied against is seen as someone who has been wronged, by being 'pasted' with a lie' against his reputation (Slander).

into succumbing, learning to lie; and yet there are also others, probably the majority, who learn to refuse to succumb to falsehood.

Statistics: How many have died?

Africans can and do count. Every African language has a numerical system, for expressing quantity, and for undertaking numerical operations. Some systems are based on primary numbers from one to ten; and the multiples of ten. This is somewhat similar to English, for example. Others are based on twenty, and multiples of twenty, with a sub-system based on five. The basic issue is that every language can express numbers fairly exactly, if there is need to do so. The expression may become clumsy after one thousand, but it can be done.

The interesting communication problem is not only how number/quantity is expressed, but what significance is attached to quantity, psychologically. In Itsekiri culture, there is a reluctance to count human beings. Nevertheless if asked: how many people ate this meal? An Itsekiri would be able to say, "ten persons", or "five men and ten women", or even "fifteen people, ten of them women, and five of them men". But the same person would say: "People were very many at the funeral." If you pressed for an estimate, you would be told either that they were really very, very many persons, or that the people there were just like the sands of the sea; or you may be told that there were so many people, they could not be counted. In this wise, one may say that the Itsekiri ability scale of numbers and estimate of quantity, goes fairly comfortably from one to about fifty; thereafter it jumps to infinity!

A large banner in various parts of the business district of Cotonou, Benin Republic, proclaims: "AIDS IS IN BENIN! 168,000 people are living with AIDS in Benin. 500 Beninese are dying every day". In 1998, 700 people were said to be dying from AIDS- related causes in Zimbabwe every week. Now the figure is 1000+. What difference do these figures make to many Africans, even those who have been to school? Do they serve as a deterrent? When is a number large enough to be alarming? Fifty? Uncountable? Does it matter?

Igbogbo revisited

In 1977–1982, with funding from UNFPA, UNESCO executed a research and training project implemented by the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. The project dealt with "Communication strategies for family planning in rural and semi-urban areas." As Head of the host department, I was named National Director of the project.

societies, and that family planning and population issues should consequently be examined in a multi-dimensional value context. We therefore, quite early decided to change the focus of our work to include family health, and family welfare in addition to family planning.

Reflecting our broad multi-disciplinary approach, our research team was composed of an economic historian (Babatunde Agiri), a public health physician (Larry Hunponu-Wusu), a Nursing Sister, a nutritionist (Remi Adegbenro) an environmental geographer (Jonathan Ekpenyong), in addition to communication researchers (Alfred Opubor and Onuora Nwuneli). Students of the Department of Mass Communication were recruited as research assistants and trainees on the project, since one of the objectives of the project was to institutionalize population communication in the curriculum of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos.

Preliminary steps

As we reviewed relevant literature, and studied the local environment, further reflection led us to a few important conclusions:

(i)   the ideas and experiences which we will encounter about family life, and especially, husband-wife relations, child-rearing and family health, exist within a structure of values deeply rooted in the cultural and religious ideas and practices of the people of Igbogbo;

(ii) traditional practices of family planning/contraception, and attitudes towards family size are part of a structure of ideas within a logical framework, with underlying rationality, as well as contradictions and inconsistencies;

(iii) communication interventions designed to affect the knowledge, attitude and behavior of semi-urban and rural Nigerians should take into account, their cultural dispositions and social activities, and exploit them systematically;

(iv) exposure to modern mass media is selective on the part of villagers; but leisure time use of media is heavy, especially through exposure to ethnic-language entertainment radio programs and sports broadcasts;

(v)   participation in ethnic group social activities is considerable, occupying much leisure time. Visiting relatives and friends, and engaging in communal socializing are valued, and generally practised;

(vi) consequently the theoretical orientation should focus on how to insti-gate attitude and behavior change on fertility, contraception and fam-ily life issues through exploiting the 'chinks' in the cultural armor. The

could show he cared for her by agreeing to limit the size of his family, and by taking steps to prevent further births. Ibisola becomes pregnant again. Unable to survive the difficult birth of twins, she dies in childbirth, thus becoming the tree trunk that was crushed by the fruits.

In the final scene of the play, the husband, Agboola, walks onto the stage with the newly-born twins in his arms, ashamed, confused, in tears; a tragic victim of his own cultural rigidity and selfishness.

The actors, students of the local teacher-training college, had rehearsed hard and long for nearly four months straight, with our dramatist and research team, and gave a convincing and professional performance. The play's use of local folklore and history as well as the local dialect of the Yoruba language created an instant bond with the largely indigenous audience of over 800 persons. Right from the opening dance drama, with its invocation of the praise names of the culture heroes and founding leaders of Igbogbo, and the accompanying sounds of talking drums, the audience was drawn into the action, and stayed with it all the way through to the inevitable tragic end.

There were few dry eyes in the open air village square in Igbogbo that December night in 1979 when the play was first performed. Men and women sniffled quietly. Some wept openly for Ibisola, and for Agboola and maybe even for themselves, in a kind of collective catharsis. It was a powerful emotional experience shared by the community, demonstrating the potential of drama as a mass medium; and vindicating our original intention of the festival and cultural performance as effective media of persuasive communication.

In the follow up research, three months and six months afterwards, more than 80 per cent of those interviewed remembered the story line and understood the lesson of the play, that unregulated fertility can bring misery and even death, and that it can and should be prevented.

Ayitale: Theory and practice

The theoretical underpinning of ''Ayitale'' was ''logical inconsistency». Basically, it was argued that the same individual can hold, at the same time, thoughts or ideas which may be in contradiction. So long as these contradictory thoughts and ideas are not brought into direct confrontation, the individual is quite at ease. But should there be reason for these thoughts to confront one another, the individual will be forced to make a choice. The choice made implies a change of attitude with reference to one or other or both of the ideas in conflict

groups or the individual-in-the-group? What communication strategies would be applicable for creating change, from an Afrocentric perspective? What are the meta-languages of African communication? Should we study them language by language and culture by culture, or their generalizable communication framework related to 'Africanity'? What tools or combination of intellectual skills do we need to accomplish the task of answering such questions? What contribution can African social scientists: anthropologists, socio/psycho-linguists make to creating a knowledge base? Would comparative studies be valuable?

What can the Igbogbo experience teach us? How can we capitalize on it for our research and action programs? Perhaps one of the lessons from Igbogbo is in fact, that long before the current fad, we in Nigeria, at the University of Lagos, had developed a model of behavior and social change communication, based on the African community festival.

I have often advocated an 'ethnography of communication' approach. This would be a good time and place to take this agenda forward and see to what heights it might take us in our effort to understand how African societies view communication and how that knowledge may assist our efforts to place our discipline within our cultural contexts, and by so embedding it, provide us greater explanatory and applied power in our research and teaching as well as our programs of social change.

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