

African Traditional Communication System for Sustainable Cultural Heritage; Igbo People's Perspective

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Abstract

African traditional communication is a different method through which the people of Africa communicate to each other from their ancestors to descendants either by words or other forms without writing. It can also be defined as the ways traditional Africans transmit information from age to age and from generation to generation without keeping a single script. Since ages, many Africans have their own means to disseminate information. Though anytime African traditional means of communication is being mentioned, people's minds run towards the use of talking drums such as ikoro, ikpirikpe, opi, ekwe, guns, kurutu and oja. It is really observed that some of the above mentioned materials were used and have gone into extinction somehow but the purpose of this study is to showcase some living things and non-living materials which still communicate to people on daily basis in different cultural settings that need to be sustained for the purpose of cultural heritage. In Igbo communities, most of them are natural entities

which refused to be influenced by westernization or modernization. Therefore the new generations are supposed to be knowledgeable of them and the type of messages they disseminate. In trying to achieve this, data were collected by oral interview from different Igbo communities. After the analysis, recommendation, suggestion and conclusion were made.

Keywords: Traditional communication, cultural heritage, westernization or modernization, indigenous knowledge and extinction

Introduction

The meaning of communication does not have clear dispensation in context. This is because many scholars keep maintaining that the word was derived from the Latin verb “commūnicāre” which could mean “to discuss, chat, highlight, talk, confer or even to sensitize each other”. Commūnicāre also means to share or the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules. Some authors agree that the word comes from Latin noun “communis” which means “common”. Okunna (1999) supports that communis is derived from a Latin word meaning common. When something is common, it means that it must be shared by more than one entity. To justify their argument, they say that to communicate means to make the message of communication open and common. This is why Ault, Warren and Edwin (1965) say that communication is the art of making things common knowledge. Before the above arguments from those scholars, Africans were communicating and that is why the Igbo people called it “ izikoritaozi”.

Communication can also mean the state of exchanging information between entities. It can also be defined as transferring information from one or more parties to another.

According to Huss (2002) Communication is simply defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning. For him, it is considered as a process because it is a series of event to produce a result; it is an activity or a set of behaviour and not an unchanging product. Communication is not an object that can disseminate information. Communication is a process according to Olekaibe (2012:19) "... a sequence of events and relationship that are dynamic, ongoing, over changing and continuous." The processed manner of communication proves that it does not have a beginning, a fixed point or end, it is dynamic and not at a rest, it moves from one place to another. Black and Haroldsen (1995) opine that Communication is the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills etc. by the use of symbols, words, pictures, figures, graphics and others. For them, exchanging of words is not the only way communication can take place rather inclusive with other things that can disseminate information. Dringer (1982) says communication is a process that started perhaps even before we knew how to write or spell the word 'communication'; it perhaps dates back to advent of life itself. For him, Communication is as early as human race. Crystal (1997:72) puts that "Communication is the transmission and reception of information between a source and a receiver using a signaling system." For Crystal, it is by making use of signals to transfer information. Okogbe (2002) explains that communication is a discrete aspect of human enterprise. For him, communication takes place when one's mind acts upon its environment and another mind is influenced.

Before communication takes place, there must be a process of sending and receiving messages through verbal, non-verbal, signs, signals and even behaviour. This paper x-rays the traditional means of non-verbal communication from entities which Igbo people observe daily ranging from their homes and on the ways.

Methodology

The data collection were focused on three major sources; The Library method which gave the researcher the insight of where many authors write copiously on communication, In-depth oral interviews which involve discussion with people in oral questions from diverse Igbo cultural communities and the Internet browsing where different researchers share their views online. The data were analyzed using Ethno linguistic Vitality theory which determines the relationship between language and identity. According to Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977:308) “An ethno linguistic group’s vitality is what makes a group likely to behave as distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situation.”

Factors for Effective Communication

There are numbers of barriers which may disrupt and effect the overall interpretation and understanding of what was communicated. The under listed factors can hijack communication on the process of reaching the receiver.

- a) Cultural differences; the differences both within and outside the society for instance having a communication with an outside organization or ethnic minorities may impede communication process. This may be lack of understanding on the people’s belief.
- b) Disabilities such as blindness, deafness and dumbness, mental disorder and dyslexia can also affect proper communication and should be taken into consideration when examining the effectiveness of the communication process. A blind person cannot see any iconography which can only be communicated through eyes. A deaf and dump person cannot hear any iconography that communicates through sound.

- c) Unknown receiver; in a situation where the receiver is unknown, it also plays a major role to determine the effectiveness of the communication. Unknown receiver may not understand non-verbal means of communication very clear. An unknown receiver may need more explanation to decode the message.

Elements in Communication Process

Communication according to Huss (2002) is considered as a process of understanding and sharing meanings, therefore, there must be some elements that would be present in the communication process before it can be successful and effective. The communication process has major elements such as the sender, message, channel, receiver and feedback. In general, the sender sends a message with a certain aim in mind. The receiver of the message tries to comprehend and interprets the message, then gives feedback to the original source who in the order way round interprets the feedback. When these processes occur successfully, communication has taken place. Communication can be successful when the sender sends the message, the receiver perceives and understands it clearly. The source delivers the message, while the receiver is the intended target of the message to be interpreted. Message can be verbal with words used to symbolize thought. Charles (2008) supports and says communication can be verbal with words used to symbolize thoughts or is non-verbal with bodily movements, vocal inflection or facial expression carrying the sender's meaning and feeling.

Channel of communication is the means whereby message moves from the source to the receiver. A message moves from one place to another. To Donald (1989)

Two meanings are attached to the concept of channel. One can think of the media tools useful for transmitting information, meaning and feeling, such as; newspapers, magazines, books, televisions, radio broadcast and other audio and visual devices. One can also consider the sensory channels, those related to the human sense.

For him, channel of communication is not only speech oriented but through other sense organs. For instance, it can pass through eyes, ears, skin, tongues and even nose. Oppapers (2011) points out that every human society has developed its indigenous, traditional modes and channels for communication which characterize its existence, organization and development. Before a message is sent, the sender should ask whether the channel is appropriate for a particular purpose. Sending message through inappropriate channels can end up in creating confusion or ambiguity to the mind of the receiver. Another overt response to sender's message is feedback. This can be verbal and non-verbal. In verbal form, it could be simple phrases such as: ewoo!, chai!, agreed, yes, okay, no problem, hmmm, no, etc. Non-verbal feedback can come in form of voluntary action which comprise nodding, sighing, frowning, smiling, quizzing etc. Otagburuagu (2004) posits that whatever the form of communication, verbal or non-verbal, visual or audio, interpersonal or intrapersonal, dominating or incidental, social or transcendental, if it is not audience-specific, it does not take into account.

This paper is interested in non-verbal Igbo traditional means of communication. A non-verbal communication according to Wilson (1990) is traditional admixture of social conventions and practices which have almost become sharpened and blended into veritable communication modes and system and which have almost become standard practices for society. Non-verbal communication is also known as action

communication. It is believed that action speaks louder than voice and this is where most Igbo traditional means of communication system belong. Traditional means of communication according to Akpabio (2003) are man media, oral media, informal media, informal channel of communication and communal media.

In all Igbo states and communities, there are ancient methods of communication that refuse to go into extinction no matter the influence of westernization and colonization. They seem to be inherent in people because they transmit information from age to age and from generation to generation without keeping a single script. These types of communication have refused to extinct, thereby need to join hands to transfer the knowledge to the new generation to sustain the Igbo cultural heritage.

This paper is not only interested in non-verbal means of communication but basically in two modes of non-verbal means of communication namely; animal mode and iconographic mode. Iconography according to Okeke and Obasi (2014) has to do with items representing something else. In other words, they are items or elements that pass across information. They do not transfer information by words. For Hybel and Weaver (1989), cited by Okeke and Obasi (2014), words are not used in passing across the information. They further identify four basic principles of non-verbal communication, which are:

- a) It is culture dependent, that is, much of non-verbal cues we use in communication are passed unto us by parents and older members of the communities.
- b) It may conflict with our verbal messages to the extent that our intentions may be misinterpreted. This happens when one says one thing, while one's action

sends a completely different message. This situation can give rise to a mixed message.

- c) It is largely unconscious, that is, in most situations; we are unaware of some of the non-verbal cues that we employ in getting across our messages to hearers.
- d) It is important in revealing our attitudes, emotions, and feelings to the person, or persons with whom we are communicating or the subject matter of the discourse.

Animals and iconographic modes of communication are pure traditional means of communication and have refused to go into extinction. Traditional means of communication according to Akpabio (2003) are man media, oral media, informal media, informal channel of communication and communal media. Another name that can be applied to traditional communication is indigenous communication system. It is a communication done in most rural areas through traditional channels. They are done almost every day. Kendra (2011) supports by saying Every day, we respond to thousands of non-verbal cues and behaviors including postures, facial expressions, eye gazes, gestures and tone of voice. Nevertheless, animal and iconography are traditional means of communication which are observed on daily basis.

Iconography is based on community historical background, their experiences as well as circumstances. Iconographic communications are in uniform in most Igbo states. They disseminate information according to community belief. Some of them include:

Owl (ikwighikwighi):

It is a bird of prey with large eyes, a facial disc, a hooked beak and typically a loud hooting call. Owl is also known as spirit

animal. Igbo people call it “ajonnunu” which can be translated as “bad bird”. Harris (nd) puts it thus:

The owl spirit animal is emblematic of deep connection with wisdom and intuitive knowledge. When the spirit of this animal guides you, you can see the true reality, beyond illusion and deceit. Owl also offers for those who have it as a personal totem of inspiration and guidance necessary to explore the unknown and magic of life.

Looking at Harris point, one can observe that owl is not an ordinary bird. For him, owl can connect someone with wisdom and intuitive knowledge, and this can lead to a question by asking how could it be possible?

In general Igbo world-view, when owl perch on somebody's house or on a tree near any house and cries, it symbolizes death. The people see the cry of owl as a bad omen which announces the imminent death of a close relative or someone living in that vicinity. According to Igbo cosmology, owl is a messenger that can only disseminate information about death. The people do not take the cry of owl for granted because when it cries out, if there is no proper measure taken to avert death, it will not take time for someone to depart. Owl disseminates true information and it is one of the animals that communicate to Igbo people.

Chameleon (Ogwumagala):

This is a small reptile which belongs to the family of chamaeleonidae and one of the known lizard families able to change color and project its long tongue. Chameleons are adapted for climbing and for visual hunting.

They live in warm habitats that range from rain forest to desert condition. Some chameleon species are able to change

their skin coloration. Different chameleon species are able to vary their coloration and pattern through combinations of pink, blue, red, orange, green, black, brown, light blue, yellow, turquoise and purple. Some parts of Igbo society, according to Mr. Anthony Obeta from Imilike, Enugu State people see it as a reptile sent by divinity to disseminate information about death. That is the reason people put curse on it anytime it appears. When they see it, the next step is to throw sand on it with the proclamation that “no one will die among the people living around”. The people said that anytime one meets chameleon coming directly, the person will lose a close relation but whenever someone sees it crossing a road, the death will occur but not to a relation. In that area, the appearance of chameleon is also to send the message of death.

Cockerel/Rooster (Okeopka):

This is a male mature chicken less than one year old. It is believed that it has not been castrated. A cockerel can also be referred as a young rooster. Though the time when a chicken transition from being a cockerel to a rooster is a bit ambiguous, but a rooster is a well fully matured chicken which can mate with hens. Cockerels have combs on their heads with longer and more decorative tail feathers. In Igbo culture, a rooster has been and still a sacred bird which can be used for spiritual purposes. The people ritually, sacrifice rooster to their gods believing that it has the ability to disseminate information very fast to the ancestors. It portrays in Achebe (1984:12) thus: “When Unoka had gone to consult Agbala, he stood before the priestess and said, before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land.” The people also believe that Ikenga which is an “alusi” of southeast of Nigeria requires consecration before religious use with offerings which include the sacrificial blood of a rooster for the spirit. In support to this, Greer (2008:135) opines that “Tiwah festival involves the

sacrifice of many animals including the rooster as offerings to the Supreme God.”

- Diviners also use roosters for divination with the intent of communication between the gods and man in which the diviner observes a cock and pecking at grain. Gurdon (1904) puts that khasi people believe, the rooster is sacrificed as a substitute for man, it is been thought that the cock when sacrificed, bears the sin of the man. It is also observed that so many religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Samaritanism, Judaism, Islam, Shintoism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism and African traditions use roosters for spiritual communication to spirits; gods or God.

- Rooster communication does not end in a spiritual means only but time- wise. Rooster keeps time more than human beings. Roosters indicate time ranging from 3; 00am and 5; 00am and dawn. To Igbo people, cockcrow indicates time for them. It communicates to the people exactly what the time is at a particular crow without looking at clock. This is the reason the Igbo people always conclude their early morning movement thus; anyiga-apu ma okeokpa nkembukwaa” which means by 3; 00am or ‘ ‘ mgbeokeokpa nke abuokwara” which is 4.00am. Roosters are perfect time communicators in Igbo society.

Dog (Nkịta):

Dog is a mammal that has been domesticated for many thousands of years ago. Dogs are the eyes of the blind and ears of the deaf. Dog brings joy and companionship to people even to a lonely person. Dogs can make somebody smile when it noticed that you are totally down and out of mind. Dog is one of domestic animals that does not care about the nationality, color of the skin, language, whether you are rich or poor. Some people call it man’s best friend. It is a social animal that can play with the owner and the rest of the family members. Dog

performs a lot of functions in terms of communication. For MrsNwinya from Izzi, Ebonyi State,

Dog searches for something and rescue people, tracks thieves both in the day and at night, it communicates through barking. Anytime dog barks simultaneously, it shows that there is strange thing around, identifies the movement of evil spirits like witches and wizards.

Dog easily communicates to people around when there is danger. Hunters use dog when hunting because it has the ability to indicate animals in bush and equally communicates to its master without delay. Dog has different styles to disseminate information, it sometimes uses its tail or even barks when the need arises.

Palm frond (ọmụnkwụ):

Palm frond is the most succulent branch of palm tree. Palm fronds can be obtained by chopping the uppermost log segment of a palm trunk. Palm is a crucial iconographic material in Igbo traditional communication. The Igbo people use palm frond in different manners to disseminate different information according to community historical background and belief. In some parts of Igbo society, if palm frond is placed on any piece of land, it signifies warning to everybody. It indicates that there is dispute or that the land belongs to a deity. In such case, nobody is allowed to enter there because it stands as a symbol of authority and any disobedience will bear the consequence that may come out of it. Any tree tied with palm frond, nobody touches the tree or the fruits. When a trader dies, the palm frond will be tied on the shop or stall to announce the departure. When someone died in a home, palm frond will be tied on the door where the diseased is laid. Ugochukwu from Nri in Anambra State said in an oral interview that:

In Igbo traditional religion, if somebody wants to offer a sacrifice to gods either in the market square or at any road junction, the person will tie palm frond round his head or hold it on his mouth just to inform people that he is on a sacred mission to avoid greeting of any type.

Wine tappers use palm frond as a sign post to communicate people that palm wine is sold around there. In some parts of Igbo society, if any group of youths tie palm frond round their heads, it tells people that there is a painful and premature death and are showing grief.

Igbo kola nut (Ọjị Igbo):

Igbo kola nut is quite different from other types of kola nut. It is different because Igbo people revere this type of kola nut for so many reasons. It is equally very prominent in Igbo culture. It is very prominent because in welcoming a visitor, in ceremonies and religious life, the kola nut celebration is always found to be the first thing to be used to communicate the gods (Achebe 1984 :14)

Okonkwo presented a kola nut to Nwakibe and alligator pepper, he broke it, saying: We shall all live, We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness, you will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me.

In Igbo society, kola nut is the only nut that symbolizes peace and unity. Kola nut has different lobes or pieces fused together without physical force binding them together. The number of lobes that a kola nut contains communicates different things. Apakama, (2010) avers that “The kola nut without any lobe is called ọjịOgbi, a dumb kola nut which is not fit for consumption and indicates a bad omen”. In Igbo society, any

kola nut without lobes cannot be eaten because its communication indicates there is evil on the way. Kola nut with two lobes is also considered as bad omen. They cannot be eaten and cannot be used for any good thing. Below are different communication modes from the remaining lobes of kola nut in Igbo culture.

- a. Three lobes: ‘oji Dike’ or ojiIkenga’ which symbolizes stability, strength, power and virtue which are cherished by both humans and spirits.
- b. Four lobes: Signifies four Igbo native market days known as afọ, nkwo, eke and orie. They symbolize approval from the spirit of all the market days.
- c. Five lobes: ‘oji omumu’ which signifies productivity and wealth needed for the survival of Igbo people.
- d. Six lobes: Disseminate generosity and participation of the spirit of the land. It is the spirit s that eats the sixth lobe therefore must be thrown outside.
- e. Seven, eight lobes and OjiUgo: are very rare and are called for a lot of ceremonies.

Communication with kola nut is mainly on socio-cultural aspect of Igbo people.

Red cap and Feathers:

In Igbo traditional setting, males and females can put different patterns of cap but not red cap. Red cap indicates a titled man depending on their geographical location. It is so because there are different title names such as ozo title, Onowu, nze, onyishiarua, agadagidi, ichie, ozioko etc. Their names come according to dialectal variance but all is given high honour. Their differences are indicated with feathers. Three types of feathers the titled men normally use according to Okeke and Obasi (2014) are eagle feather, vulture feather and rooster feather. Any man that places Eagle feather on a red cap

entails that he deserves highest honour in the society because the feather indicates the type of position he acquires. In the other way, vulture and rooster feathers are mostly used by native doctors in their shrine during sacrifices.

Summary and Recommendation

Having examined the Igbo traditional means of communication, it is observed that despite the westernization and modernization, so many modes of communication refuse to go into extinction which proves that some cultural traits are natural. It is clearly pointed out that communication is of two forms known as verbal and non-verbal. Non-verbal is divided into four, comprising of instrumental, symbolic, animal and iconography. This paper basically dealt on animal and iconographic modes of communication and also observed that all the communication modes are as early as human race. Both verbal and non-verbal means of communication started with the creation of man.

Notwithstanding that some modes have gone into extinction, many of them refused to leave man, and thereby need more attention to sustain the Igbo cultural heritage. When the researcher was collecting the data, it was also observed that most parents rebuke and beat their children when they speak Igbo language in their various homes. Now in a home where their native language is prohibited, how do the parents transfer their cultural heritage to their children? The answer is that both Igbo culture and language are endangered. It is recommended that those Igbo parents who force their children to speak foreign languages; particularly English should be reoriented on the impacts of what they are doing to avoid all these ethical abuse. In a society where an indigenous language which is the most vital aspect of culture is abandoned, how can the people transfer their cultural heritage to new generation? This is one of the reasons some younger ones in the society cannot read the

language of a red cap designed with eagle, vulture or rooster feathers by any titled man. Some of the English spoken children do smuggle seats with the titled men in occasions or ceremonies because they don't know the value and meaning of what the titled men are putting on.

Moreover, the people do not have the belief that kola nut does not hear English language, now a child that cannot speak Igbo language; wouldn't the person attend any socio-cultural gathering in Igbo land? Will he bless the kola nut with English language or wouldn't he participate in any cultural activities in Igbo land? The paper fully recommended that every family that thinks that communication on Igbo language is timid, should stop that negative notion because it is best to communicate with your indigenous language from welcoming a child into the world than introducing it to another ethnic language, thereby denying their trait. Igbo parents should try to use their indigenous language at home because it is the means by which culture is controlled, created, preserved and conserved. It is a vehicle of power that gives people identity and also a bond that links culture. If you prohibit a child from the indigenous language, the child will not understand when those animals or iconographic materials are communicating to them, therefore, "*subakwaranu ụmụakaunu Igbo* speak Igbo to your children..

Notes

1. Okunna, C.S. in *Introduction to Mass Communication* (1999) supports that *communis* is a latin noun which means common in English language.

2. Ault, A. Warren, K. & Edwin, E. in *Introduction to Mass Communication*, (1965) defines communication as the art of making things common.
3. Huss, R. in *Fundamentals of Communication*. (2002) for him, communication is a process of understanding and sharing of meaning.
4. Olekaibe, C.C. "Traditional Means of Communication in Igbo Land: Effects of Westernization/Christianity". (2012) sees communication as a sequence of dynamic event.
5. Blake, R. & Haroldsen, E. in *A Taxonomy of Concept in Communication*. (1975) observe communication as the transmission of information by use of symbols, words, pictures and others.
6. Diringer, D. in *The book before printing; Ancient, medieval and oriental*. (1982) claims that communication started even before we knew how to write or spell it.
7. Crystal, D. In *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*, (1997) for him, communication is the transmission and reception of information.
8. Okogbe, T.P. "Communication Needs Exceptional Person: The problems and prospects of the Mentally Retarded" (2002) communication takes place only when one's mind acts upon its environment and another mind is influenced.
9. Giles, H; Bourhis, R.Y. & Taylor, D.M in *Towards a theory of language in ethnic group Relations*. (1977) emphasized on the theory of ethno linguistic groups vitality.
10. Charles, U.O. in *Contemporary Issues in Communications and National Development*. (2008) indicates that communication can be verbal or non-verbal.

11. Donald, W.K. in *Interacting in Group Theory and Practice*, Colorado (1989) discussed on the media tools such as newspapers, magazines etc and other audio and visual devices.
12. Oppapers.com Traditional Communication. in <http://www.traditionalcommunication.html>. (2011) insist that every human society has developed its indigenous and traditional modes and channels for communication.
13. Otagburuagu, E.J. *New perspective in business communication*. (2004) says that communication must be audience-specific.
14. Wilson, D. in *taxonomy of traditional media in Africa: Theory and application* (1998) opines on the sharpened and blended veritable communication modes and system.
15. Akpabio, E. in *African Communication System: An introduction system*: (2003) discussed on media system of traditional means of communication.
16. Okeke, C.O & Obasi, G.T. "Semantic Content of Igbo Traditional non-verbal modes of Communication". (2014) explain iconography as items representing something.
17. Hybels, S. & Weaver, L. (1989) Cited by Okeke and Obasi "Semantic Content of Igbo Traditional non-verbal modes of Communication". (2014) identify four basic principles of non-verbal communication.
18. Kendra in <https://www.forbes.com>pictures>resp>. (2011) clears how people respond to thousands of non-verbal cues and behavior.
19. Harris, E. in www.spiritanimal.info/owl-spirit. on the article emphasizes on how owl spirit animal is emblematic of deep connection with wisdom and intuitive knowledge.

20. Achebe, C. in *Things Fall Apart*. (1984) shows how Igbo people use cock to communicate to Ani the owner of all land.
21. Greer, C. D. in *Religions of Man: Facts, Fibs, Fears and Fables*. (2008) the involvement of the Tiwah festival involves the sacrifice of many animals including rooster.
22. Gurdon, M. "Notes on the Khasis, Syntengs and allied Tribes". (1904) shows the Khasi people's belief on sacrificing rooster as a substitute for man.
23. Apakama, L.M. "Kola nut Celebration : A sure way to Global Peace" (2010) explains the significance of Igbo coolants and the meaning of their lobes

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