

# AN X-RAY OF UPE (AFRICAN FLUTE) IN AFRICAN COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

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## Abstract

Scholars in communication especially in mass communication have their views reflected in Western communication and see no serious business in discussing African communication in African context as if Africans had no means of communication before their contact with the western world. Assumptions of such scholars are just an attempt to cannibalise the effective traditional media which Africans have explored over the ages to reach and achieve their target within a specific culture. This paper through personal interviews explores the African flute, its uses, limitations and how it can be combined with other media in traditional settings to achieve the maximum effect. It however recommends, among other things, the support of African governments (both at a local and national level) to find experts on traditional media in order to develop and advance the hardwares.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Media, Modern Communication, Non-verbal Communication, Verbal Communication, Selective Exposure*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

African communication system has been in existence right from the date Africa history began. Africans communicate in various ways. Communication is the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols. Explicit definitions and theories of communication were not proposed until 20th Century when advances in science and technology gave rise to the mass communication media. Before then inter-personal communication predominated humans and even today it still represents the most effective way of communication, especially in Africa.

An oral tradition is universal among African language groups, facilitating the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. Knowledge about iron smelting, farming, and

animal herding, for example, has been passed down orally. In addition, greetings, eulogies storytelling, proverbs and riddles, all contribute to the rich oral tradition of the Africa people. In all African cultures, a greeting encounter is an art in oral communication. Greetings go back and forth for several turns, are highly involved, and always indicate the age-status of participants. There are many channels of communication that enabled our forefathers to interact and maintain a stable relationship and information. From traditional rulers messages are being relayed to the subjects (Ebeze, 2002, p.27). Records have it that various means of communication channels were being used in the past to send messages to villages during emergency, war time, dissemination of news of a dead person, or a hero or even to summon able body men for a purpose.

It will be wrong to say 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. Communication includes writing and talking, as well as non-verbal communication (such as facial expression, body language or gestures), visual communication (the use of images of pictures, such as painting, photography, video, or film), and electronic communication (telephone calls, electronic mail, cable television, satellite broadcast and internet). Communication is a vital part of personal life and is also important in any situation where people encounter each other.

Early societies developed systems for sending simple messages or signals that could be seen or

heard over a distance such as drumbeats, fire and smoke signals, or lantern beacons. Even messages were attached to the legs of carrier pigeons that were released to fly home. Semaphore systems (visual codes) of flag or flashing lights were employed to send messages over relatively short but difficult-to-cross distances, such as from hilltop to hilltop. In Africa, traditional communication means, according to Ebeze, include symbols and codes, moral traditions which include mythology, oral literature (poetry, story-telling, proverbs), masquerades, witchcraft, rites, rituals, music, dance drama, costumes and similar abstractions and artefacts which encompass a people's factual, symbolic and cosmological existence from birth to death and even beyond and most of these are still in use till date.

## **2. INDIGENOUS MEDIA**

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Various attempts have been made by different scholars to define, describe and classify indigenous communication such as Hughes (1984) Ugboajah (1985) Dissanayake (1984) (as mentioned by Ansu-kyeremeh, 1998, p.2). Following various attempt to make traditional communication comprehensive, Ansu-kyeremeh sees it as:

Any form of endogenous communication system, which by virtue of its origin form, and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilization of the values, symbols, institutions, and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualities and attributes (p. 2).

The description of Ansu-kyeremeh gives evidence to the overview of what a traditional channel of communication is. It means it must serve as a mechanism to convey the way of life of those living in that community; their values, mores, ethos, culture and it has to be what the community recognizes as a medium of power force. The powerful force there denotes an acceptable medium that carries messages to people of similar culture. Akpabio (2003, p.3), after understudying the forerunners of

indigenous communication (scholars like Ugboajah, Doob, Wilson, Ansu-kyeremeh, Moemeka among others) submits that indigenous communication entails the followings:

1. It is part and parcel of the way of life of a people.
2. It utilizes symbolisms from the community and hence readily connects with the people.
3. It represents the values of the community as well as age-old.

This means institutions come into play in the communication process. Going by the submission of Akpabio, the use of symbols and signs is part of the communication channels that enhances the communicative effectiveness of a given community where such is being employed. One thing is certain in the indigenous media which is unique – the emphasis is on the little media and small communities rather than big media and larger populations, each striving towards a focus to achieve maximum success. The oral media audience is usually located in widely dispersed settlements within a culture and these media usually meet the larger need of the community (Wilson, 1997, p. 66). The kind of medium employed to disseminate information in each community depends on the kind of information the source wants to ditch out to the public. However, audience has awarded great importance to whatever means employed to disseminate the information.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

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Qualitative research through an in-depth interview was used to carry out this research. The interview was used as an instrument of data collection while secondary data was added to support the research work.

The work also relied on the niche theory which was first used in the field of ecology. It explains that media technologies always compete with one another, while the superior one overshadows the less superior. As a result, it is the media technology which the new generation of media users melt on ground that they will prefer to use and such may signify the death of the less superior technology.

#### 4. MEETING POINT: VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Thus, Trenholm & Jensen (1996, P. 55) attest that non-verbal communication is limited to behaviours that are consciously attended to by sender, receiver or some third party. They expatiate that we may not be aware of the non-verbal messages we send to others and if that is the case communication has not taken place. The error they commit is that they forget people cannot communicate. The non-verbal message may be perceived by the receiver as communication while it is not intended by the sender. For instance, one may hold a slice of yam and after cutting small parts of it with his teeth he holds the remaining part up in a direction as if he intends to give it to someone else. Actually, the one in the opposite direction will or may perceive the action as if the first person offers to give the leftover of the yam while in actual fact the first person is merely stretching up his hand waiting to finish chewing before he has another bite.

However, the power of non-verbal codes cannot be ignored. Either we communicate spontaneously or symbolically, our behaviour can evoke powerful messages. Though non-verbal messages speak louder than words, the efficacy of such depends on the social situation and relational goals within that situation. The powerful forces of non-verbal codes can be discussed as:

1. Non-verbal codes frequently give more credence and trust than verbal forms of communication. Non-verbal communication has been in longer use than verbal mode. The first 12 to 18 months of human life has been said to rely on non-verbal means of communication. Based on the signs we use from infancy, we know what specific non-verbal mode means in a specific situation.

2. Non-verbal codes are more emotionally powerful. Non-verbal actions tell others about our emotional state. You can imagine if the heart is sad people in the environment quickly identify that. Even when we try to hide feelings, our close friends still know. Morris (1977, p. 86) refers to myriad gestures that express emotional bonding (interlocked arms, shoulder embraces,

hand-holding) as “tie signs” that physically connect people in ways words cannot, hence man may be short of words to express a feeling but a non-verbal expression will certainly achieve this.

3. Non-verbal codes, while influenced by culture do express a more universal meaning. People of different linguistic backgrounds spend so much time to learn each other’s language, but they share non-verbal symbols easily by smiling and wrinkling their faces in disgust. Happiness, fear, anger, surprise, sadness and disgust are all expressed via facial muscles.

4. Non-verbal codes are continuous and natural. The body movement and gesture without beginnings and endings flows into each other which means they are more natural parts of human existence than words. The physical extension of bodies makes it to be immediate and the form resembles their message more than words’ form does. Then non-verbal occurs in clusters. Verbal communication is limited to a channel at a time while non-verbal operates various multi-tracks, like a studio recording and operating various things simultaneously.

The differences in verbal and non-verbal codes may be tagged digital and analogue. Analogue codes indicate meaning by being similar to what they convey. The movement of an actor seems real in people’s real life experiences while verbal codes, which are digital codes, convey meaning symbolically. Symbols are arbitrary and conventional because the relationship they have with things they represent is artificial rather than natural. For instance, the word ‘anger’ is just a combination of sounds and letters to represent emotion. Nothing suggests the feeling of anger in the word anger but it is a convention of social construct.

As both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication complement each other, aside that each can still stand on its own, verbal codes as well as non-verbal ones have their own powerful force in communication as following:

1. Verbal codes consist of discrete, separable units. This gives flexibility to verbal modes because of the sounds and meanings that are discrete and separate (Trenholm & Jensen, 1996, P. 91). Hence, words and sounds can be modified, combined in unique ways and transmitted singly



or in combination across time and space. Storage and retrieval is possible as opposed to the non-verbal codes.

2. Language encourages us to create new realities. Through language we discuss absent and non-existing things. Words don't need actual referents in the real world, language allows creativity, but it also gives room to description.

3. Language gives us the ability to think in new and more complex ways. Abstract nouns, logical words such as "and", "or", "all", and "none" will be difficult to express analogically.

## 5. CLASSIFICATION OF INDIGENOUS MEDIA

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This work draws strength largely from the work of scholars like Wilson, Akpabio, Ansu-kyeremeh and Ebeze who, based on certain criteria, classified traditional media under verbal and non-verbal. Meanwhile the prevalent mode in a particular region may be determined by its flora and fauna, as well as mineral and other resources since they are needed in the manufacturing and construction of communication devices, as well as the skills needed in their production (Wilson, 1998, p. 27).

Classification of this mode of communication is complex, notwithstanding various scholars have justified their classification on specific criteria from various perspectives. Wilson (1998, P. 27) has made the classification clearer by fitting them into various classes that form the traditional communication modes; he divided this into six classes thus: instrumental, demonstrative, iconographic, extra-mundane, visual and institutions. All the six classes are further subdivided into groups.

Ebeze (2002, pp. 29-31), in his categorization, has mainly divided traditional communication into verbal and non-verbal. The verbal aspect, he insists, contains market place, town crier, visits, church and village square while the non-verbal comprises idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, signals, objectifics, colour schemes, music, extra-mundane communication, symbolic display and other forms. Looking at various classifications, the verbal aspect of Ebeze is the same with what Wilson tagged institutional

classification, while the non-verbal amounts to Wilson's other five classes. Because of the express nature of Wilson's classification in its simplicity, this work will follow the six classes of classification.

The instrumental which includes the idiophones, membranophones, aerophones and symbology are those which when beaten, blown, or scratched produce diverse sounds based on the ingenuity of the traditional newsperson. *Idiophones* are instruments which are self-sounding instruments, in this category include woodblock, metal gong, bell, rattle, wooden gong and the likes. For instance metal gong is used by town criers in Emure, Ekiti State to signify an importance. This form of communication is only being beaten to draw attention to the message from the traditional ruler. The *membranophones* uses skin or leather drums to produce sounds. They can be beaten or struck with a bare hand or stick to produce the effect or desired sound. They are being used during various ceremonies and festivals. An example is the leather drum in Emure, Ekiti State; this is only being beaten by women around 2:00 to 4:30 a.m for seven days whenever an important person like the king or first class chief dies. *Aerophones* produce sounds as a result of the vibration of a column of air. Some of those in this category include whistle, ivory tusk, reed pipe, deer horn and the flute. There are very good instruments of music in communication. The flute can be used to summon the Ugbamos in Ekiti, Ogun Festivals in Ondo and Ekiti State.

Others include *Symbology* which comprises decorated bamboo rhino, chalk works, the use of cryptic representation in the form of writing made on the surfaces of hard or soft objects – including cloth and the ground. *Music*, which is another medium of communication, can be used to convey messages. It can be used to criticize, rebuke, correct or satirize. During Opa Oguru Festival in Emure, Ekiti State, it is being used to rebuke those who act deviant against societal mores. *Signals*, which include camp fire, gun shots, whistle call and cannon shots, have significant importance in traditional communication. Gunshot, as a form of non-verbal communication, is universal especially in military ceremonies. It can also signify the demise

of an important person in some Africa communities.

*Objectifs* provide concrete items which are specific to cultures. For example, kola nut, white pigeon, she goat, young tender bud of the palm frond and others. She goat is being used in traditional marriages in Yoruba land to indicate that the bride will be fruitful. *Incantatory/graphic*, which comprises rituals, libations, obituary prayers, and invocations, are used to communicate supernatural beings: spirits, gods of ancestors.

*Colour/Appearance*. Combination of colour and appearance also conveys meaning. The black colour is almost universal in Nigeria and it signifies the morning moment. The red colour represents danger, while white represents purity. Social and spiritual institutions like marriage/chieftaincy, shrine, and masquerades are used as communication media in Africa. For example, masquerades festivals, in some part of Yoruba region usually heralds the celebration of the new yam festival.

## 6. UPE (AFRICA FLUTE) AS MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

The African flute, which will be explored in this paper, belongs to the class of instrumental media and to the aerophone family in particular, as a medium of traditional communication. Aerophones produce sounds as a result of vibrations coming from a column of air and *Upe* (flute) does exactly or functions through this means. It cannot be said to belong to the class of membranophones, because membranophones produce sounds through the vibration of membranes which are struck or beaten.

## 7. FUNCTIONS OF UPE (FLUTE) AS GENRE OF AEROPHONE

This medium of communication has so many functions which shall be described one after the other. Chief Gabriel Ologe said that in the beginning, it was being used for meta-physical purposes, especially for those who are in the spirit world (personal communication, August 7, 20103). The efficacy of this African flute lies in

the incantation invoked in it. Another use of it can manifest during the period of *Ogun* Festival (god of iron) in every October in Emure. At the eve of the festival the African flute is blown to assemble the crowd in the town. In this way some will tie palm frond at the mouth piece of their flute as soon as they know it is time for *Ogun* Festival and this practice goes on today.

This African medium of communication is also being employed every September during the yam festival. It is a tradition in Emure Ekiti, Ekiti State that new yam should not be sold in the open market until the yam festival is celebrated to herald the beginning of a new-year. Normally, the king of this town doesn't eat new yam until September to signify a new-year after which new yam can be sold in public or open markets. Hence, new-year starts every September in this area of the world; the king and his chiefs must not eat new yam until the festival is celebrated. In order to kick off the yam festival, the flute must be blown round the town. The difference between blowing it during Yam Festival and *Ogun* Festival is that during *Ogun* Festival palm frond must be tied at the edge of the flute, but during Yam Festival it is being used without attaching palm frond. Differences also occur in the months of use - yam festival occurs every September while *Ogun* celebration comes up every October.



Fig.1. Mr Ologi, a custodian of *Upe*

Again, when a male child clocks thirteen years, it is mandatory for him to go through the process that leads him to manhood, otherwise he has no right to jostle for any social position in this community, nor can he become a traditional chief. Though, during such periods the African

flute is not being blown round the entire town, the use of it is only restricted to the environment in which the initiation ritual takes place.

The use of *Upe* is as old as the history of the town. Pa Talabi Ezekiel (personal communication, August 7, 2013) revealed that the instrument was the medium used to assemble the community during the ethnic war. However, this function is no longer active because the community fought the last war over sixty years back. During those periods of war, the war commandant, based on the directive of the monarch would commission a designated person to blow the flute round the community and the villagers would lesser than 20 minutes assemble and be fully armed for battle. The use of this medium to assemble villagers for war has been inactive for years since the town has not fought war for a long time; young generations do not know the function of this instrument as such unless they are told by the elders.

This instrument up till today is being blown during chieftaincy coronation. Normally, the tradition of this town regarding the conferment of chieftaincy is done within an interval of a decade to celebrate the ascendancy of the king on the throne of his forefathers. Though occasionally there may be need to fill a vacuum of a traditional position at the demise of an important chief but conferment of the chieftaincy title is usually done at an interval of decade and the African flute is normally being used to herald the ceremony. During the decade celebration called *Ero*, the oldest men in every clan are consecrated to be spokesmen of their respective clan and whatever they say is the final.

The use of *Upe* (Africa flute) is also put into effect during *Opa Oguru* Festival. This is a kind of festival where satirical songs are composed for those who have gone against the norms and values of the society. This festival is held once a year and it comes up every June to help correct societal ills. For instance, prostitutes or adulterers, thieves, liars and those that are deviant to societal norms and mores are jeered via the use of various songs to make them change their ways of life. It also serves as warning to deter others from following bad steps or engaging in bad behaviour. However, modernisation is gradually eroding this culture to the extent that the young

generations do not know the importance of this traditional means of communication.

## **8. CHALLENGES OF UPE**

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One of the problems limiting the capacity of *Upe* is the conflict between the traditional and western system. The new generations of young lads do not believe in most of the festivals in which the medium is being used hence, the fear that the use of it may soon go into oblivion. An interview with Chief Ologe (interpersonal communication August 7, 2013) attests to it that young people are being compelled to uphold the tradition. The chief compelled the researcher to blow the flute before he handed one flute over to him. The problem of urbanization and noise foists serious challenge to the flute as a medium of communication. The sound of various desks and vehicular movement restrict access to traditional messages. Various sources of human and mechanical noise do not allow the message from the traditional newsperson to penetrate as it used to be in the past ages.

What this paper considers the greatest limitation to this medium of communication is the lack of scientific and technological knowledge to advance the hardware and the use of this medium. Replication of message is slow since the instrument is not fully developed. No nation can live in isolation of technological advancement so old tools of communication may continue to lose their relevance if they don't move with technology advancement in order to transcend local barriers. Critically, this cannot be said to be the fault of traditional scientists, but it is the attempt of the western world to dominate the universe so they can be worshipped by the least developed regions; as such, they deliberately played down the traditional modes of communication. Such has made them (the white) to destabilize and disassemble the African traditional values in such a way that it is difficult to translate them into modern technologies. Meanwhile, African traditionalists are extremely secretive in their way of doing things and this has also contributed to our underdevelopment (though this is paramount to Africa culture).



It is a known fact that *Upe* (African flute) does not transcend space so the apparent differences in live value of information cannot compete with the western communication gadgets. Related to this is the political and economic system that does not support the development of the instrument. The Nigerian government has not dimmed it fit for a day to bring experts together in order to bring out something tangible from the indigenous instrument of communication. The African flute is also, like other traditional channels of communication, a victim of diversity in the traditional political system in Africa. As a result, the conflict between one channel and the adopted system requires the use of western media, which is already structured in policies and facilities in resolving the challenges.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Traditional communication channels are still as relevant and effective today as they were before if they are used effectively. Be that as it may, the scholars' various research has proved that the media of mass communication cannot produce the desired result especially in rural areas, but they need to partner with traditional channel and vice-versa. Therefore, it will be enormous for traditional modes to function at this stage where experts converse for the development of journalism. Again, a traditional newsperson can easily fit-in in order to achieve the development goals. Development has to be created in a specific environment through the education, motivation and mobilization of the people for a particular development activity. Such people intended ought to have the opportunity to discuss all issues by asking questions like what kind of development is necessary, what are the means, rate and costs. There is no better medium to achieve this than the traditional media.

### Way Forward

- **Believe in the African way of life:** Greene, H. (n.d) says: "Everything is impossible before it works" while Chesnutt, C. W. (1930) believes "impossibilities are merely things of which we have not learned, or which we do

not wish to happen". It is believed that the only way of finding the limits of the possible is by going beyond them into the impossible so pigs might fly if they have wings.

- **Developing the African communication system:** Developing indigenous form of communication to the standard that can compete favourably is not impossible if African governments can bring experts in such field together and give them the wherewithal to succeed in terms of advancement in hardwares. After all, we have heard from our forefathers how they used to communicate with their mates in other villages through extra-mundane, without necessarily being present. However, this must not be done in private but in openness. The custodians of the traditional medium of communication should not forget that a ritual not taught by young men will die of natural death. So, traditional communities should make it their duty to perpetually use the traditional medium to reinforce the values of the society while young lads should be taught on the uses and the importance of traditional media.
- **Harmonisation and utilization of flute with other media:** Combining of flute with other media can achieve an unimaginable effect. For instance, combining the flute with institutional modes like marriage, chieftaincy shrine and masquerade channels to serve as means of entertainment and passing instruction will go a long way to salvage the image of traditional communication. It can also be combined with music (songs, choral and entertainment music) to create a colourful ceremony. Restoring the use of *upe* can mean the restoration of equality and justice which Africa has known before the white disassembled their values.

**Modern and traditional media as complementary:** Both modern and traditional media of communication when combined make a difference and achieve a greater result. Moemeka (2000, P.150) argues that some traditional modes as social forums, town crier and local market are more effective than the modern forms of communication like radio,

television and newspaper. Traditional media command credibility because they have been in existence for centuries and endorsed by traditional rulers. For example, it takes the effort of Federal Government of Nigeria to appeal to Emirs in the Northern part of Nigeria before the Northerners could accept health workers to administer polio vaccines in their region. The potency of traditional media to overcome selective exposure, perception and ensuring instant feedback is also a plus to traditional modes. Modern modes of communication also have a lot of advantages which are absent in the indigenous communication. The ability of the mass channels of communication to transcend beyond space, its simultaneity in time of message dissemination coupled with the ease of selective attention is a plus to technology advancement. However, both serve complementary role to each other for effective result. Modern channels of communication may be employed to create awareness while village square, opinion leaders, village heads market associations and town criers will further be used to spread the messages to nooks and crannies especially in remote areas. Also, that Nigerians wake-up daily in darkness and suffer all day long from Power Holding Company of Nigeria, modern communication is limited. Traditional communication, when combined with modern communication, achieves huge success over selective exposure and perception. Selective exposure and perception are low at an interpersonal level but high in mass

media channels hence combining the two modes will generate the desired result. Again, modern mass media channels can be used to send out messages while the traditional channels can be used to monitor the feedback.

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