CULTURAL HERITAGE | REVIEW ARTICLE

Modernity could not destroy them: historicizing the African oral artist and the traditional means of communication in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examines the identity of the African verbal artist, his communal functions and his role in information dissemination in Nigeria. Before the advent of modern telecommunication systems in Nigeria, the various Nigerian ethnic groups had means of passing on messages/information among them; hence, they were abreast of the issues affecting their corporate existence. With the advent of western civilization came speculations that these African verbal artists and their art would go into oblivion due to the new technological means of communication. However, using a historical approach this research traces the relevance of African traditional mode of communication to entertain, disseminate information, advertise products and services, fulfill psychological, social and economic needs of the communities where they operate. We, therefore, argue that the co-existence of modern and African traditional verbal artists is necessary for effective and comprehensive communicative and service delivery.

Subjects: History; Cultural Studies; Media & Film Studies

Keywords: modernity; tradition; oral artist; role; history; information; communication

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper is a Socio Historical account of the verbal art artist and his contributions to the communicative and social needs of the people especially in the rural areas of Nigeria, where social amenities like electricity and internet services that will give them access to mass media and social media are not available. Nigerian rural dwellers, most often, are not abreast with current information on matters concerning health such as the presence of new diseases, prevention and management, innovative methods of agriculture, education, trade, and social life due to lack of or inadequate communication. This research posits that the employment of oral art artists to apply their play way traditional concepts and methodology in both urban and rural areas will not only disseminate information and educate the masses on the various facets of their lives in interesting and engaging ways but will reduce the economic, physical and mental stress involved in modern information and communication technology.

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1. Introduction
The story of the early man as primitive and also a wanderer imply that he was unable to communicate his thoughts and ideas. However, through linguistic communication, man climbed a higher social ladder as he began to not only represent his thoughts to himself but to convey them to others. Through communication man was able to understand each other better; learn to like, influence, trust each other, begin and end relationships. The point being made here is that communication is the foundation for all interpersonal relationships, and our daily lives are filled with one communication experience after another (Anyachonkeya & Anyachonkeya, 2012, p. 1).

In Nigeria, the traditional means of communication was in use prior to the arrival of print and electronic media which is considered in this paper as modern communication. To further buttress this view, Sulaiman A. Osho had this to say:

The uniqueness of the African means of communication is embedded in their originality, creativity, tradition and culture of the people. These essentially make them highly effective and enduring in the dissemination of information personally, inter-personally and through group communications. However, the enduring nature of the African means of communication has actually made them to subsist and relevant in the contemporary world despite the emergence of organs of mass communication like books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, telex, facsimile, internet and the social media. (Osho, 2013)

In the absence of steady electricity supply, the oral artists are the most realizable communicators in the rural areas as they engage in performances in their communities which are meant to entertain, support and educate their audiences. Language forms the major tool with which they communicate with their audiences. The oral artist, most often, functions as a composer, performer and a narrator as we find in a traditional praise-singer, storyteller, griot, professional mourner or a group of individuals we see in the community dancers and choral performances. If it is an individual, the identity calls to mind what Plato says in Ion (2019), that a poet is one who is either insane or possessed by the gods—for “not by art does the poet sing . . .” (Ion). In this case, the verbal artist is an individual who is distinguished from every other member of the community because of his possession of certain qualities/talents that may be lacking in others. He is in point of fact a gifted individual. The case of a griot readily comes to mind as one who can be said to possess some supernatural powers, and who seem to be under a spell during his performance.

The same thing can be roughly said of a group of individuals, only that these may be individuals who have trained themselves for the performance of a particular function in the community such as dancing in a communal event, singing at a burial etc and so lack the spontaneity often found in griots. The performers could be a part-time or full-time artists. Of the identity of an oral artist, Ruth Finnegan adds:

Performers are also of certain ages, gender, social position, training, reputation, and competence. There is also the simple but important fact that they have names, individual personalities and life histories. Some are highly acclaimed experts, set apart from others by their profession and esoteric knowledge; others in no striking way different from members of their audiences; others again anywhere between these two. (Finnegan, 2012: 90)

In the last analysis, the artist may be performing singly or in pairs, in a small or large group; they may as well be exchanging roles with other performers as a leader, follower or equal, and interacting with the audience during the performance. It is in respect of this that Finnegan observes that performance most often involves several participants in varying roles, so delivery skills and performance conventions will probably not be confined to the “front man”. Even the most apparently passive “audiences” may be deploying learned conventions of audience skill which play a crucial role in a successful performance (Finnegan, 2012:102).

Whatever their composition, the oral artist remains an outstanding figure within the community. Even though males form the majority of rural oral artists, women are not left out, however;
literature is mostly silent about them (Nnaemeka, 1994). Females are great composers and use the song mode to communicate issues pertaining morality, joyful or sorrowful events such as deaths. In fact, the death of a person is usually announced through the lamentation of women. Disasters are made known through the lamentation of the female folk. They send out piercing cries which carry though the quietness of the village atmosphere and to lure people to the direction of the cries.

Female lead singers and composers imbue words of wisdom into their songs and also use them to speak about social ills or to expose certain secrets that are causing problems in the society. Their relevance in oral composition and performance is to integral that society usually look upon them for creativity, entertainment and communication. Even male performers borrow from the lyrics of their female counterparts to embellish their own works. Females perform as dirge singers to express grief at occasions such as funerals.

They are in most cases seen as the embodiment of the moral conscience of the community, and his social function determines to a great extent what Habermas calls “the we-consciousness of a people’. Of this, Habermas writes: the “we-consciousness” is founded on “an imagined blood relation or on cultural identity, of people who share a belief in a common origin, identify one another as ‘members’ of the same community, and thereby set themselves apart from [others]” (Habermas, 1998:130). Thus, the oral artist strengthens the bond that holds members of society together through the performance of their function within the social sphere. Being the custodian of tradition, they ensure the transmission of this from generation to generation. Their chief function in the community might range from the harmonization of the communal goal, articulation of the moral dimension of the community, preservation of communal memories to sounding a note of warning when members of the community derail from the normal course of action. One, of course, does ignore the aspect of entertainment which as well constitutes the artist’s function, as their service is sought in some social occasions simply for the entertainment of the audience. The relevance of their art in this case depends on how well he can meet the need of the audience.

Because of the nature of African oral artist, ascribing authorship to an individual performer is often problematic; sometimes what is advocated is group ownership, with such terms as “the group mind”, “the folk mind”, or simply the “tradition”, all of which give the impression of a historical antecedent that underlies the artist’s performance. However, as Finnegan argues in her Oral Literature in Africa, “the myth attributing all oral literature either to the ‘community’ alone or, alternatively, to one particular portion of it is not true to the facts, because the whole picture is much more complex than such simplified and speculative assumptions would suggest” (Finnegan, 1992: 23). For this reason, we may conclude this section by saying that merely describing someone as “the author”, “the performer”, “the narrator” by which we mean the originator of the verbal art is therefore not enough, since complex interactions lie behind all of these terms.

There is no verbal art outside the performance, so in order to bring into being a verbal art, the artist has a crucial role to play, by not just contenting himself with the composition, but actualizing it in performance. Being the pivot of verbal performances, the artist “gives body and form to the material, formulates and realizes it within specified occasions”. Just as a text is born only when it is published by the author, so does verbal art emerge only when it has been performed by the verbal artist. According to Joseph Muleka, one does not know the verbal art until it has been performed (2014, p. 87). And in this performance, the verbal artist, gives them life and fullness (Scheub, 1971, p. 31).

The four components of oral performance include composition, transmission, audience and context, and each of these is to a large extent determined by the artist. The content of the composition is at the whims of the verbal artist, who in some cases is the creator, tailoring or reshaping it to suit the context. As is to be known, verbal art is composed as it is performed, that is, composition-in-performance. But scholars like Karin Barber are of the opinion that there is a model
of text from which each verbal artist draws, it does not matter if this model exists in no other place but just in the people’s minds (Barber, 2005:266). This goes to say that there is a kernel of every performance which survives the transient nature of the performance.

Taking this synergy between oral artist and his audience into perspective, this paper argues that the African oral artist has a great role to play in enlightening the rural dwellers. This paper takes a look at the traditional means of communication, the use and relevance of the traditional means of communication, the challenges of traditional means of communication in the face of modernity and concludes with relevant suggestions.

1.1. Traditional means of communication

By operational definition, traditional system of communication is a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated by western culture or any other external influences as in the case of many parts of the world (Wilson, 1987: 89). This definition to a large extent renders invalid Ayantayo’s claim that “African indigenous communication systems are means by which African people communicated with one another in the primitive era” (Ayantayo, 2010:3). The truth is that development orchestrated by digital and information technology did not in any way render the traditional means of communication in effective.

According to Nwabueze, the traditional media are those means of communication that are peculiar to typical African societies. They refer to those modes of communication still used by rural dwellers and often used also in urban areas. They include such communication forms as folk theatre, travelling story tellers, poets, talking drums, flutes, traditional dances, metal or wooden gongs, town criers, village squares, markets, streams, churches, mosques, masquerades, extra mundane modes, e.g. spirits and gods (Nwabueze, 2004: 295). The traditional means of communication is synonymous with the culture of the people.

In the olden days and even now in many rural areas of West Africa, every community usually has people called town criers who go about disseminating information in all parts of the community. They use instruments like talking drums, metal gongs, wooden gongs; bells, etc., to draw people’s attention before passing information to them. Also used in information dissemination in many communities is the big wooden gong which is rarely beaten except in times of emergencies. This type of wooden gong which is known as “IKORO” in some parts of Igbo land, when beaten, signifies that there is danger, that an important man has died as we read in Things Fall Apart (1958:96) and everybody is expected to gather at the common/village square, where members of the community discuss issues of common concern for the people. Onuorah (2016, p. 22) describes it as a “monumental slit drum associated with Igbo communities East of the River Niger.”

There is also the use of Talking Drums. These drums were mainly used by community heads to pass information to their subjects, especially, when they want them to assemble to be addressed on important issues. The trumpets are used for communication because their sound go very far. In some communities, they are used to alert people of any danger or the presence of their enemies. The use of the blasts of local guns is still in use in most West African communities to mark the beginning of the celebrations of important festivals, visitors in the community and burials of individual members of the community.

Other methods used in traditional communication include setting fire on bushes and the use of palm frond. Whenever green grasses are burning, it indicates a situation of emergency and anybody that sees the face must try to find out what has happened. The use of yellowish and unfolded palm frond serves as a means of communication. It is used to indicate danger on a road, to show that a particular land or house is out of bounds, or to indicate a vehicle carrying corpse, etc. The use of Kings Heralds and Metal Gong are part of traditional means of communication. Kings or heads of communities also communicate with their subjects by sending and receiving message
through their palace errand boys. The metal gong a hollow metal beaten with another metal to make announcements to members of traditional community constitutes one of the ways of information dissemination (Nigerian Traditional Means of Communication, 2013). Jerome Okonkwo asserts that:

Traditional means of communication appears in various arts (dialogue, story-telling, singing, proverbs); corporal expression (drawings, decorations, costumes etc.); games and rite; gatherings (religious feats, markets, meetings, ceremonies); musical instruments and craft tools. All these are media being used for socio-cultural purposes, such as the transmission of cultural heritages and passing-on of skills and knowledge. They are often used by adults in the education or training of the young in the society, they may also be used to encourage popular participation in decision making. (Okonkwo, 2000:41)

The importance of traditional means of communication is manifested in the notion that they transfer the culture of the people more that electronic and print media as physical participation ensures that nuances are derived not only from the linguistic items but from body languages of speakers and environmental factors or contexts. Traditional communication interprets people's culture and culture is the spine of people's identity, therefore, if this aspect of communication is neglected, a wide gap is created between people and their neighbours (Onah, 2004: 292). Unfortunately, modern means of communication is not in touch with this reality.

For the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, communication is a process by which meaning is conveyed in attempt to share understanding. It is all about sharing of one's inner self with one's fellow human. In any case, communication must be able to transfer and share knowledge (Okere, 2007: 34 and 37). Nolue Emenanjo's view is that communication is language driven. Human language is essential to human communication. But human communication involves much more than speech sounds arranged in a structured system of words, phrases and meanings (Emenanjo, 2001:30). Cultural communication is a compendium of factors, agencies, institutions indigenous to the culture and tradition of a people, the totality of their human and material resources which are harnessed and utilized as elements of communication in their task of social development (Anumih, 2007:1). Hence, by implication, African traditional modes of communication are forms of communication emanating from the interplay or synthesis of traditional customs and conflicts of a community, its harmony and discord, its cultural affinities and disparities (Konkwo, 1999:7).

1.2. The relevance of the traditional means of communication

Even though traditional art is very important in the society, as a means of communication, it has suffered immensely since the inception of the missionary and colonial rule. Ayandele reports that African drums and costumes were condemned by early converts of the church (Ayandele, 1966:29), and European racist supremacy was exhibited in worship and public places in Nigeria including manner of communication. Ayantayo (2010:11) states that the Europeans regarded the Nigerian indigenous communication system as archaic, traditional and rudimentary. These kinds of condemnations influenced the negligence of African methods of communications in favour of modern methods in spite of the benefits they have for the rural dwellers who have little access to modern technology.

Nigeria has many traditional means of communication which have served their communicative needs competently. The idiophones are percussion instruments capable of producing themselves (self sounding instruments) and this includes both wooden and metal gongs of all sizes. Sounds are produced from them by stricking, pricking, pressing, pulling with other objects. There are also Membraneophones, which are media on which sound is produced through the vibration of the membranes tightly attached on hollow objects. They include all varieties of skin or leather drum. These drums are beaten or struck with well carved sticks to produce varieties of sounds which send variety of messages to the community. These messages are interpreted according to the conventionalities of meanings they share(Nwosu, 2013:124). Wooden aerophones are traditionally
popular among the people. Aerophones are objects, which produce sound as a result of the vibration of a column of air which is forced through a kind of pipe. Air is forcefully blown into it from the mouth and the trapped air comes out of the hollow object with a sound. The sound is modified by placement and removal of fingers from the tiny openings by the sides. The aerophones include instruments such as the flute family, reed pipes, horns, trumpet and other such kinds (Fletcher, 2012, p. 2).

Symbology is another mode of communication which is done by placing objects in a particular way to convey meaning. The use of flames, smoke, staff, palm fronds, etc., are symbolic means of conveying information to others. People also communicate traditionally through the use of signals and signs (Muhammad, 2014:86). This mode of communication produces sounds that signify or symbolize a communication event within the context of a specific setting. Gun shots and cannons signal burials in Igbo land as witnessed in the burial of Iche Ezeudo in Arrow of God. They are used to herald the arrival of the dead into his home or during the interment. The number of gun or cannon shots released for an individual symbolized the quality of the man or the financial strength of his people. Signs as means of communication include marking of an object to give warnings, and guides and instructions, such as tying of a red cloth on a tree with fruit to warn thieves off the fruit, signs on the ground using leaves to give directions, using body signs and facial expressions to communicate. Objectics involve concrete forms of displaying significance through traditional contextual meaning such as white feather, white egg, palm frond, red cap, walking staff, “ofo”, etc. traditional communication also makes use of colours. Colours are universally symbolical but vary in interpretations from one time to another and from one culture to another. Colour red is associated with danger in traditional African society, while colour white symbolizes purity, love, joy, glory. Green signifies life and fertility while black is used for mourning. Music in the traditional setting can serve as a means of providing veritable source of information and communication. It is well organized sound and a means of expressing emotion (Nwosu, 2013:124).

Traditionally, there are ways through which communication takes place as exemplified in communications between the supernatural beings like gods, ancestors and living human beings according to cultural belief systems. It takes the form of charms, songs, (dirges), incantations, ritual prayers, sacrifices, libations, invocations, trances and hysteriques and divinations. Symbolic displays which includes universal significance of certain attributes are also means of traditional communication. They include smiling and sticking out the tongue (Ayantayo, 2010, p. 8; OgwezzyA, 2008, pp. 97, 107, 125; OgwezzyB, 2008, pp. 126–127; Wilson, 1987, pp. 91–94). All these are found in tradition and operate effectively in the lives of the people.

1.3. Traditional means of communication in the face of modernity
The modern means of communication is no doubt faster and effective. However, in a typical Nigerian setting, there are limitations to the extent modern means of communication goes. In the rural areas of Nigeria, modernity has not reached the hinter lands and electricity and internet services are unavailable. It becomes impossible to use something like phone to summon everyone to a village meeting for instance. Hence the dependency is still on traditional means of communication. In this manner, valuable knowledge and information are lost due to certain information not reaching the people in these areas. As Ifeanyi Onah acknowledges:

Communication among the majority of the people is still difficult because strategies have not been harnessed to liberate the discriminative attitude of the people. It is undisputable that mind engaged in ethnic or tribal and religious selfish impedes effective communication, be it traditional or conventional. Traditional communication is simply an expression of one’s feeling is backed by culture. (Onah, 2004:288)

We have noted the various traditional means of communication and the ways they operate. In his study of the Yoruba, Poopola asserts that folk tale is used to communicate old stories to both and young
children, while poetry known as oriki is used in recording family history, while market is a good avenue to disseminate news. Drums play significant role in alerting the Oba of the entrance of a visitor and summoning young men to war. He went further to note that masquerade is used in restoring peace, while the town crier disseminates information to all nooks and cranny of the society, wooden/Dane gun is used as a form of salute to the deceased and Aroko is used in transmitting urgent information sent by the Oba, and Pepper is one of the means through which the community is given news of an impending war with another, could be broken and palm frond is used to communicate that nobody should touch an economic tree or do anything on the land that is in dispute (Poopola, 2004:110).

The uses of traditional means of communication in the face of modernity are not without challenges. According to Ogbonnah et al., many African villages are located in remote areas and they do not yet have electricity, or the ability to receive broadcasts from radio or television. This situation creates many tensions and difficulties for the governments of these African nations, because they must find ways to communicate important messages related to health and welfare of their people to all the citizens of their countries; when not all their citizens can receive messages via modes of mass communication such as radio or television, and not all of their citizens can read newspapers or mass distributed flyers or brochures (Ogbondah & Siddens, 1999: 3).

In Northern Nigeria for example, many of the failed immunization campaigns in the past has been as a result of the inability to communicate in proper cultural parlance and to convince the populace on the benefits of such exercise in a language they will understand. Hence, traditional means of communication has been identified as a possible way for messages to be packaged and transferred in locally popular artistic forms. This can be rivaled by any other means of communication with regard to reaching the localities. In Nigeria, traditional means of communication is often reflected in radio broadcast and information dissemination by the Government. Ogbondah and Siddens suggest that:

The Nigerian government uses these forms of communication (mass media) in association with modern satellite and broadcast technology to send messages related to health and welfare of the Nigerian people to the tribes and villages. (Ogbondah & Siddens, 1999: 4)

They went further to highlight that:

Nigerians who still live and operate within the Paradigm of the oral culture are more likely to be able to relate messages conveyed through means which they are familiar, such as drum language, masquerade and puppet theatre, then they would be some sort of anchor person or announcer speaking to them on a radio or television broadcast, or a mass distributed pamphlet or brochure. (Ogbondah & Siddens, 1999: 4)

The various government programmes mostly health programmes are most times sent to the rural areas through the traditional means of communication. Programmes relating to immunization vaccines, Kick out Polio, Roll Back Malaria, Ebola Virus and COVID-19 pandemic awareness are also passed on to the rural populace through traditional communications. The access to data, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and other digital platforms are not yet rural dwellers friendly. Some of the aforementioned platforms do not speak to the psychology of the people in all its ramifications. The example of northern Nigeria following the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in Kano is a reference point. Vasina (1978:351–352) reveals the extent oral tradition could penetrate to the memories of the people and thus making communication easy.

The traditional means of communication unlike the modern means of communication can operate in verbal and non-verbal means. It is deep rooted in culture and as such is best understood within the geographical space where it operates. It serves to a large extent as the socialization agent and acculturation process of any given society. The traditional means of communication is not certainly in conflict with modernity. As an essential ingredient of grass root mobilization notwithstanding the age, traditional means of communication is still viable. Politicians are still mobilizing the grass root using the
indigenous method of communication. The introduction of GSM handsets and other apparatus of information technology have not appropriately addressed some of the challenges of communicating in the language the people will understand. Hence, the traditional means of communication alternates a great deal with the modern means of communication. For instance, the gong man or town crier already mentioned in this paper serves as the news purveyor of the village because of his rhetorical and communicative skills. One of the advantages of using this medium of communication is that it draws the listener’s attention first, prior to the dissemination of verbal message to the people (Ogbondeh & Siddens, 1999: 8–9). This is a rare attribute that cannot be found in modern day telecommunications. Furthermore, efforts are being made, as part of transformation in order to catch up with trends of events in the society, as advertisers who are desperate to penetrate the grass root uses motorized town crier (Poopola, 2004:110). Apart from being generally understood, the peculiarities associated with the traditional communication systems include readily appealing to the peoples language, culture, beliefs, myths, values, norms, ethos and also enhancing message effectiveness (Ogwezzy, 2008:21).

2. Conclusion
In this paper, it has been established that traditional means of communication are still very much underutilized in spite of its appeal to the traditional manner of life of the people. Secondly, the forces of cultural imperialism, vis-à-vis modern internet and telecommunication globalization, is gradually eroding the core Nigerian values with regards to communication. This study, therefore, highlights the fact that concerted effort should be made to promote indigenous oral artists and their works to avert the dangers of extinction of our local languages and most of our cherished cultural values which are transported through traditional modes of communication.

From this exploration, it can be seen that the oral artist is an important figure with regards to the existence of traditional means of communications. Without their efforts, as has been pointed out, the rural dwellers may lose the grasp of the quality of information being communicated to them. The persistent underplay of the significance of the oral artist affects the proper integration of the rural dwellers with the realities of the day. The truth of the fact is that, if digital revolutions like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and other Internet Apps find their ways into the rural environment, development increases, the pattern of information dissemination that will boycott the use of the verbal artists and traditional means of communications may, at this stage of development, not yield effective results. There is no doubt that when these oral artists are fully integrated into information and communication channels across both urban and rural areas of Nigeria, there will be increase in knowledge and development. We, therefore, suggest that both modern technological means of communication and traditional verbal art artists should exist side by side for an integrative and expansive outreach in information dissemination in Nigeria for the good of all citizens.

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