



The Importance of Traditional Communications in the Grassroots: A Study of Akpet Central in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In all political, social and other campaigns run in rural communities like Akpet Central in Cross River State, electronic media are the norm. Media programmers tend to take Cross River population as a homogenous entity and they design communication events using the same channels for both urban and rural populations. But with the peculiarities of the ruralites like those in Akpet Central, there seems to be a drawback in the acceptability and usefulness of electronic and modern media forms. Besides this, there is also a severe limitation in the reach of electronic media such as the Cross River Broadcasting Corporation (CRBC) Calabar and Hit FM to rural communities like Akpet Central. Using the example of Akpet Central, this study sought to evidence the importance of traditional communication systems in the political and other development of the people in Nigerian rural communities. The study concludes that modern communication media like radio, television, newspaper and magazines amongst others cannot be relied upon for political or other development purposes in that rural community; and that if communication is to be used for political and other developments in rural communities like Akpet Central in Cross River State, traditional communication channels like the town crier, gongs, song, music, age-grades, and masquerades will be more effective in producing the needed catalyst. This is because the people are predominantly rural and lack basic education, while also distanced from the metropolis where modern communication systems mediate realities.

KEYWORDS: Mass media, Traditional communication, development, grassroots, Akpet Central

Introduction

Every global development process employs relevant tools to mobilize affected people to attain set goals. Such tools, especially in third world countries as Nigeria where rural dwellers represent over seventy per cent of the population, are more patterned to meet the needs of citizens in the rural areas. As a country with a nascent democracy and low literacy levels, to achieve development goals requires the use of traditional communication and media systems to share meanings and influence the behavioural patterns of rural dwellers. As Constantindima, Teodoresau and Gifu (2014) notes, all communities are endowed with sets of symbols and signs that are traditional to them, and define their mode of communication, which arouse shared meaning. In other words, traditional media in Africa are communication channels that mirror the culture of particu-

lar groups of people within African societies (Ukpong, 2017). Thus, traditional media are designed to protect the established norms and values of such a society (Ibager, 2020). In Africa, the traditional media or instruments of communication serve as sources of cultural, political, health and enlightenment programmes for the masses (Iyeh and Onuche, 2016). Accordingly, rural Africans may prefer traditional to modern communication systems regarded as "superficial" and unable to address their deep seated cultural issues. To them, familiar traditional parameters such as metaphors, village dances, folksongs, etc deliver messages far more effectively (Wefwafwa, 2015). Thus traditional media could be used as catalyst for developing grassroots politics since they offer the possibilities of participation, integration, symbolism and efficiency in meaning-making. Grassroots political development can be seen

as activities carried out in the rural areas for the benefit of the ruralites. Such activities include mobilisation for elections, voting and standing for elections.

Akpet Central in Biase Local Government Area is one critical example of a grassroots community, angling towards political development. Located along the Calabar-Ikom highway, it is bounded in the North by Akpet No.1, in the South by Ibiai, in the East by Iko-Ekperem and in the West by Okurike and Ugbem communities, all in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State. It is the administrative headquarters of Biase Local Government Area, and the people are predominantly farmers whose major produce are yam, cassava and plantain. They speak a language called "Ukpet". While most of the community identifies as "Christian", there is a laid-down traditional system of administration headed by a traditional chief addressed as "Obot". Most of the indigenes are first school leavers while many others do not have any form of formal education. With a total population of twenty-eight thousand one hundred (28,100) as at the 2007 National Population Census, the Akpet Central people rely on traditional communication systems in their community.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria generally, it seems to be taken for granted that modern communication systems such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines and internet etc. are the only means of political and other mobilisations in urban and rural settings. In all political, social and other campaigns run in Akpet Central and other rural communities in Cross River State, these electronic media are the norm. Media programmers tend to take Cross River population as a homogenous entity and they design communication events using the same channels for both urban and rural populations. But with the peculiarities of the ruralites like those in Akpet Central, there seems to be a drawback in the acceptability and usefulness of electronic and modern media forms. Besides this, there is also a severe limitation in the reach of electronic media such as the Cross River Broadcasting Corporation (CRBC) Calabar and Hit FM to rural communities like Akpet Central. The use of contemporary electronic media in rural settings like Akpet Central tends to starve the people off of vital information on development efforts, since there is a lack of familiarity with such media, and they are not compatible with the people's traditional systems. In place of the failed contemporary mass media, it is expedient to examine the extent to which traditional communication tools can serve as better and more effective channels of communication for effective development of grassroots and rural settings like Akpet Central.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to use the example of the dynamics of Akpet Central evidence the im-

portance of traditional communication systems in the political and other development of the people in Nigerian rural communities. Specifically, this study sought to achieve the following:

- 1). Find out how traditional communication is used in Akpet community.
- 2). Ascertain the scope of traditional communication usage in political development in Akpet Central community.
- 3). Find out what could be done to improve traditional communication usage in developing political activities in Akpet Central community.

Research Questions

- 1). How is traditional communication used in Akpet community?
- 2). What is the scope of traditional communication usage in political developing in Akpet Central community?
- 3). What could be done to improve traditional communication usage in developing political activities in Akpet Central community?

Understanding Aspects of Traditional African Communication

Kalu, Okidi, Unagha and Chidi-Kalu (2018) opine that traditional communication exists in diverse serious and mundane forms that are acceptable and relevant in the dissemination of information among rural dwellers. Some traditional communication channels may even be visual and adorned with beauty and splendour of a regal personage, representing the ancestors, such as masquerades. In the African mythology at large, masquerades are believed to be not mere humans with frailties, but real ancestors who come from the spiritual to the physical realm to participate in worldly deliberations about posterity on designated days. This explains why they are always covered in drabs and layers of clothing. Thus, masquerades grace occasions to entertain and inform the audience about their roles and relationship to the people in society (McNaughton, 2018).

Also, the painting of certain places communicate by way of the colours used, their combinations or location that is painted, is part of traditional communication. Typical examples include shrines, palaces or sacred society's lodge decorated with murals, insignias or other arts. Tattoos and body decoration are another form of communication in the traditional context. They are based on acceptable norms and beliefs of particular ethnic groups. They often appear on choice body part (s) and provided additional cultural identity information about citizenship, particularly during the African slave trade era. Beyond conveying messages, indigenous forms of communication have been used to promote co-operation, mobilisation and participation among African people (Oyesomi, Salawu and Olorun-

yomi, 2017).

Beyond being used as information channels, traditional communication systems play vital roles in the development of the communities or villages in which they exist and are being used. According to Qureshi (2019), development is used to describe improvements in the lives of people. So, despite its primary function of disseminating information, traditional communication adds to the growth and development of the rural areas. Wilson (1987) asserts that it essentially sustains the information needs of the rural, which represent over 70% of the national populations of most Third World States. Thus, it could be said that the traditional system of communication is a continuous process of information, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated by western culture or any other external influence as is the case in many parts of the world.

Further, traditional communication systems have the potentials to mobilise rural people to action. Development agents acknowledge the potency of indigenous communication forms and their abilities to actively engage the people in food security programmes (Nigussie, 2017). Mainly because traditional/indigenous communication enjoys high credibility status among local populations, it is familiar, popular and controlled by users. Authors have warned that the mass media should be aptly used as extensions of traditional communication (Oyesomi, Salawu and Olorunyomi, 2017). This means that, if mass media needs be used, it must be used as a follow-up and in conjunction with traditional communication. Wilson (1987) further notes that traditional communication is used for intra-cultural, intercultural and other communication purposes leading to group and national unity. He mentioned the New Yam and other festivals in various parts of southern Nigeria such as the Osun festival in Oshogo and the Argungu fishing festival in Sokoto, as typical examples of large traditional mass communication set-ups. Inherently, traditional communication systems use stories, proverbs and several other tools in mobilising people's awareness of their own history, magnifying past events and evoking the deeds of illustrious ancestors. Therefore, within the rural society itself, traditional media can optimise its own resource elements through transformation (Neng, 2018).

Traditional Communication and Political Development at the Grassroots

One task that has continuously staved traditional communication system in the face is the need to communicate for development, particularly politically, at the grassroots. The need for such development stems from the fact that the traditional system of communication is considered potent and authentic in nature because rural people totally rely on it for every political communication and development need (Pwanshikai

and Apuke, 2016). Bisilki (2018) says development communication can simply be understood as a participatory communication activity that focuses on the needs of the people at different levels, taking into account their concerns, acceptance and input towards achieving complete co-operation and support for efforts aimed at improving lives. Odom, Agyepong, Mensah, Opoku and Amoabeng (2021) uphold that decentralisation policy is important in ensuring effective delivery of development services at the local level. Consequently, development should improve the quality of life in the rural areas through proper involvement of the people in decision-making, information sharing, benefit sharing and implementation of development projects (Suleiman, 2018). To Muritala (2019), it is becoming imperative that people participate actively in development projects for sustainable development and development planners should ensure that projects are not imposed on the people. Instead, people should be allowed to decide among themselves what their needs are in order to come up with the best decisions that meet their needs or solve their problems. And, there can be no better communication channel to achieve this in rural settings, than to use traditional communication. In the context of the above, field work (2023) revealed that 60% of people in Akpet Central community in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State do not have television sets in their homes; and the 40% who have either radio or television sets in their homes do not receive signals from state radio and television stations. ACCE (1991) sums up the mass mobilization method of developing grassroots politics by stating that "it is the duty of party cadres and government officials to expose the rural population to constant ideological messages transmitted through face-to-face communication, village meetings, rural training centres and political meetings". In consonance with this, Nwoga, Chibuzor, Ibe, Nwankwo and Osita (2019) sought to find out which media, among town crier, village markets, village school, newspaper, radio, television and Internet did villagers in Bendel State of Nigeria depend upon for information about and (response to) three development projects: Operation Feed the Nation, Local Government Reforms, and Universal Free Primary Education. The authors' results clearly indicated the superiority of traditional media.

Methodology

The population of the study comprised the people of Akpet Central which, according to the National Population Census of 2007, is about 28,100 people. A multi-stage design that included the cluster and purposive sampling were used for the study because the population cuts across all age brackets and educational qualifications. This technique was chosen in order to give all members of the population an equal chance of being selected for the study. A total of three hundred (300)

respondents were sampled in the study. The sample was drawn from the quarters, streets and units on a proportional basis. After clustering the areas into five (5) clusters, the purposive sampling approach was used to administer the questionnaire copies to the respondents proportionately to 60 respondents. The five clusters are:

- 1) From Akpet Central bus stop, which is opposite the police station to the end of Iko road Health Centre.
- 2) The Ukpat Eyong area, beginning from the Magistrate Court to the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria.
- 3) The Okurike road area which is the point from the bus stop leading to Cottage Hospital road.
- 4) The Unek area which is from Chief Michael Arikpo's compound to the Assemblies of God and Apostolic Church area.
- 5) Community Secondary School road which begins from the eastern side of the Akpet Central bus stop leading to the Community Secondary School and back to the Akpet Central bus stop.

In order to collect data for this study, a twenty item questionnaire was constructed and personally administered and retrieved from respondents at home and in such regular meeting places as bars. Of the 300 instruments distributed, two hundred and ninety-six (296) representing 98.7% were retrieved and valid for analysis.

Results

Results of the survey are presented in Tables 1-15 below:

Table 1: Effectiveness of Traditional System of Communication in passing on information among Akpet people.

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	276	93.2
No	20	6.8
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 2: Respondents' Opinion on whether traditional communication systems should be replaced with modern ones.

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	30	10.1
No	266	89.9
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 3: Dropping traditional communication systems because they link to African religion and against Christianity

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	31	10.5
No	265	89.5
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 1 above shows that out of the 296 respondents sampled, 93.2% agreed that traditional communication systems are very effective in passing on information among Akpet people. From the above Table 2, a majority of the respondents, 266 representing 89.9% do not want these traditional communication systems replaced by modern ones. Table 3 shows that majority of the respondents, 265 representing 89.5% do not agree that some of the traditional system of communication should be dropped on the ground that some of them are against Christianity because they have the attributes of traditional religion. On whether some people can misinterpret these traditional communication systems in Table 4, majority of the respondents, 228 representing 77%, do not believe that they can be misinterpreted. In Table 5, 288 (or 97.3%) of the population believe that there is feedback in the processes of traditional communication in the community of Akpet Central.

In the Table 6, majority of the respondents, 212 representing 71.6% believe that the absence of modern media systems does not affect the growth of politics in Akpet Central community. Table 7 shows the belief in the likelihood of traditional communication system affecting the behaviour of people in a positive way. Table 8 above shows that 268 (or 90.5%) of the respondents support the past use of traditional communication system for campaigns and other social activities in Akpet Central community. In Table 9, 269 (or

Table 4: Opinion on whether traditional communication systems can be misinterpreted by some people

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	28	9.5
No	228	77.0
Sometimes	40	13.5
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 5: The presence of a feedback mechanism in traditional communication

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	288	97.3
No	8	2.7
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 6: On whether absence of modern communication system affect the growth of politics in Akpet Central community.

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	84	28.4
No	212	71.6
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 7: On whether traditional communication system can affect the behaviour of Akpet people positively

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	270	91.2
No	26	8.8
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 8: Support for past use of Traditional Communication System for campaigns and other political activities

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	268	90.5
No	28	9.5
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 9: On whether the outcome of the use of Traditional Communication System is positive

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	269	90.8
No	27	9.1
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 10: Ownership of a radio or television

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	116	39.2
No	180	60.1
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

90.8%) of the respondents are of the opinion that the use of traditional communication for political development purposes will positively enhance the process and bring development to the community. Interestingly, Table 10 indicates that majority of the respondents 180 (or 60.1%) do not own radio or television. Despite only a small number of persons owning a radio or television in Table 2, 278 (or 93.9%) of the respondents said they do not receive signals from the state owned television and radio stations. In Table 12, 281 (or 94.9%) of the respondents believe that traditional communication systems need to be encouraged and used even in the 21st century Akpet Central community. On the need for these traditional communication systems to be taught to age grades and other such local gatherings, the respondent gave massive support in Table 13. Of the respondents, 273 (or 92.2%) agree. Since the age grade system is foundational in the rural communities, it would be the most resourceful point of contact to help popularise it for effective deployment. Table 14 above shows that the respondents are of the view that traditional communication system can actually help the

Table 11: Reception of Radio or Television signals in Akpet Central

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	0	0
No	278	93.9
Sometimes	18	6.1
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 12: On whether traditional communication systems need to be encouraged in the 21st century

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	281	94.9
No	15	5.1
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 13: Should Traditional Communication System be promoted/taught in age grades and other such local gatherings

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	273	92.2
No	23	7.8
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 14: on whether traditional communication can help develop grassroots politics

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	267	90.2
No	29	9.8
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 15: on whether traditional communication can help develop grassroots politics

Responses	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Because most people are illiterate	122	41.2
Because they fit the lifestyle of the people	56	18.9
Modern communication systems are expensive	84	28.4
Information will reach everybody	34	11.5
Total	296	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

process of developing grassroots politics in the rural areas. From the Table 14, we find that 267 (or 90.2%) believe so. From Table 15, respondents' reasons for recommending traditional communication systems in the grassroots is revealing. 122 (or 41.2%) say it is because most rural dwellers are illiterate; 56 (or 18.9%) say it fits the people's lifestyle; 84 (or 28.4%) say it is

because modern communication systems are expensive; while 34 (or 11.5%) say that traditional communication will reach everyone, unlike the modern electronic media like TV and Radio, whose receptions do not get to the populations.

Discussion of Findings

RQ 1: How is traditional communication used in Akpet community?

From Table 1, the respondents agree to the overwhelming presence of feedback mechanism in the traditional communication process that makes it as effective as any other form of communication, meaning that it is therefore necessary as a catalyst for developing political consciousness. As the data indicates, people of Akpet Central community believe in the effectiveness of traditional communication systems in disseminating information to all parts of the community. Furthermore, in Table 2, data indicates that respondents do not want local media of communication to be replaced by modern ones. This clearly indicates the people's media preferences. Also, on the need to drop some of the traditional communication systems because they are presumed to be linked to African religion and therefore against Christianity, Table 3 indicates that majority of the population wants them retained. The import of this is that despite the fact that most of the respondents are Christian, they still want traditional communication systems used and propagated, thereby pressing home their significance. And, this is besides the fact that the people insist that traditional communication systems practiced in Akpet Central has feedback mechanisms (Table 5). In summary, the people in Akpet Central Community are strongly in support of the retention of traditional or folk media as the primary source of information dissemination in their area. Though a few argue that misinterpretations sometimes occur, a greater number consider this as negligible. In the follow-up discussions the authors had with members of the community, they mention that the notion some people make, that traditional communication is "anti-Christian" is not tenable. On this score, data indicates that the people of Akpet Central are united in their belief that traditional communication systems are effective in the dissemination of information in their community. Thus, we can contend that traditional communication system is very impactful for development in the rural areas of Akpet Central.

RQ 2: What is the scope of traditional communication usage in political developing in Akpet Central community?

One of the first issues raised by members of Akpet Central is that there is virtually no reception for Radio and TV broadcast in their community. In this sense, modern mass media are, more or less, absent. Ordinarily, the absence of modern mass media should leave a commu-

nication void in society. However, in the Akpet Central society, traditional media is all that they know, and it has ensured that the void in modern communication and information is not an issue. From all of the above, it can be adduced that, due to the absence of the modern mass media, rural dwellers especially those in Akpet Central have been developing everything in their reality using traditional media. In their society, traditional communication system has not only been used in the past for political activities like campaigns, but the results or outcome of their uses were positive, hence, they recommend their continuous use in contexts such as mobilisation, safeguarding age grades, education, entertainment, teaching on political processes and also informing on the candidature of the contestants.

RQ 3: To What Extent do People of Akpet Central Believe in the Efficacy of Traditional Communication in the Development of Political Activities in the Area?

Insofar as the people have always depended on traditional communication in their daily lives, during discussions, respondents tend to agree that the different forms of traditional communication and their uses be taught in foundational schools such as nursery, primary and secondary schools as well as in age grades and other such local gatherings. This is a clear indication that the people of Akpet Central are generally of the opinion that traditional communication should be encouraged in the 21st century in order for it to serve as a tool that can be used to develop politics in their communities. From the data derived and analysed, there are no doubts at all that the people of Akpet Central believe in the effectiveness of traditional communication in the dissemination of information among themselves, and as such they do not want them to be replaced with modern ones. Their belief is in tandem with Wilson's (1987) notion that "traditional communication system remains what essentially sustains the information needs of the rural which represent over 70% of the national population of most third world states".

Conclusion

From the data, analysis and personal communications with the Akpet Central community, it is clear that modern communication media like radio, television, newspaper and magazines amongst others for information dissemination cannot be relied upon for political or other development purposes in that rural community. Besides the fact that only a very few homes have TV and radios, the literacy to consume and the infrastructure for disseminating newspapers, magazines and other printed media is either too limited or does not exist. A greater portion of the people does not read newspapers at all, while an infinitesimal number do so once or twice a week. Together, these are all indications that the use of modern mass media for information dissemi-

nation for political or other developments will have negative effects in Akpet Central community. Since traditional communication systems have been used in the past for political activities with positive outcomes, the people recommend their sustenance even in the 21st Century. The role played by modern mass media in urban locations is the same role being played by the traditional communication system in rural areas like Akpet Central. Therefore, it is concluded from the findings of the study that if communication is to be used for political and other developments in rural communities like Akpet Central in Cross River State, traditional communication channels like the town crier, gongs, song, music, age-grades, and masquerades will be more effective in producing the needed catalyst. This is because the people are predominantly rural and lack basic education, while also distanced from the metropolis where modern communication systems mediate social realities.

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