
Adha- Nehwu, a Mode of Communication among the People of Egbu in Etche, Rivers State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This work examines the role of African traditional mode of communication with special attention to idiophone media of communication with further reference to a wooden drum called Adha- nehwu of the Egbu people in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. An interview with the chief priest who is saddled with the responsibility of beating the drum reveals that it is a potent means of sending crucial information that is of life and death. The study reveal The Adha-nehwu is normally sounded in the morning between 4a.m.and 6a.m. and under no circumstance should it be sounded at any other time of the day. The study however, recommends among others, the Adha-nehwu as a means of communication be used at any moment of the day when the need arises instead of waiting till the next day's morning before sounding the drum.

Key words: Adha-nehwu, communication, traditional mode of communication, Egbu people

Introduction

Before the advent of the modern means of communication, our forefathers had traditional means of passing information that was well understood. This traditional means of communication is a major source of African communication system, though used interchangeably. Olulade (1988) states that traditional communication as used in Africa is an admixture of social conventions and practice that have become sharpened and blended into veritable communication modes and systems which have almost become standard practices for society. It is a complex system of communication, which pervades all aspects of rural African life. According to Denga (1988) cited in Mede (1998), it has varied characteristics which include dynamism and the fact of its being a multi-media and multi-channel system. It is perhaps the most important way by which the rural dwellers communicate among themselves and with others. So, despite the advent of the modern day media in Africa, the use of traditional cues and materials is still very much common and adaptable, acceptable and recognisable by the people. The underpinning of this definition is the fact that almost every rural African community has at least one form of traditional communication or another.

Wilson (1991, p. 24) defines traditional system of communication as “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 influence”. True to

this definition, traditional communication has remained very potent in information dissemination and mobilization of the people at the grassroots for national consciousness and development. Wilson (1998, p. 30) further corroborates this when he recounted a respondent's experience in which villagers ran into the forest when Federal troops entered the town during the Nigerian Civil War, and all appeals to make them come out and return to their homes failed. It was not until the village head ordered the playing of the *Obodom* (a traditional instrument used for communication) that the citizens mustered up courage to come out.

Although traditional communication may have suffered some setbacks as a result of the influences of modern means of communications, it however remains a major source of message dissemination in many African countries. This study therefore looks at the types of African communication system before dovetailing into an instrument of study.

Classification of Traditional Methods of Communication

Wilson (1998, p. 27) outlined six classes of indigenous communication system in African to include –demonstrative media, iconographic media, visual media, extramundane media, institutional media and instrumental media. These classes are discussed to lay a background that will help us understand the study.

Demonstrative Media use music and signals in communicating its messages to people. Music communicates ideas and doctrines; signals on the other hand use instrumental modes of communication to produce sounds that symbolize an event and thus pass information. Examples of music are – songs and choral, while signals include cannon shots, fire and whistled calls.

Iconographic Media use objects and icons to communicate. Icons here represent something concrete that the people understand to represent a particular thing. No wonder Doob (1966, p. 60) states that “in a symbolic relation, the medium is able to suggest reality because not through any necessary or inherent connection but through custom and habitation; the symbol rouses responses very similar to those evoked by reality itself” such as would with young palm fronds. Wilson cited in Akpabio (2008, p. 29) notes the following as functions of young palm fronds –

- (1) Indicate the presence of a shrine.
- (2) Notify the general public about certain routes that are off limits temporarily based on their use by cults.
- (3) When displayed around a piece of land, a warning as regards the use of such land whether in dispute or not.
- (4) Restrain factions in conflicts from continuing in their feuds.
- (5) By kings to fellow kings or to vassals, point to their authority and the urgency with which messages should be treated.
- (6) Decoration during celebration.
- (7) Convey a corpse in a vehicular procession.

Although, Wilson outlined twelve functions of the young palm fronds, this work adapts just seven functions that represent what the people in the study scope understand as a representation of the young palm fronds.

Visual Media of Communication is what happens to the receiver when a certain effects produced by light on the eye brings about a realization of the different shades of colours as may be visible through a colour spectrum (Wilson 1998, p.44). This form of communication, he goes on to elucidate, also involves the changes which the difference in the form of clothing, appearance and general comportment on the part of the communicator produce on the receiver.

According to him, this sensation caused by light makes it possible for a person to carry out a differentiation of colours and attach meaning and symbolism to them in a cultural context.

In Nigeria, colours communicate so much that it has become generally accepted that black represents mourning, evil, etc; red represents danger, blood and fire; while white represents purity. When we are exposed to these colours, we quickly get the message intended to communicate.

Extra-mundane Media of communication is believed to take place between the living and the supernatural or Supreme Being. It goes beyond Intra-personal, interpersonal and mass communication. Wilson (1998, p. 42) notes that such communication “conveys the elements of a cultural celebration, dedication and consecration as is often witnessed in marriage and funeral rites; or at the pouring of libation, obituary, memorial notices and tombstone messages as the graphic forms of this mode of communication. Other forms are incantation, chant, ritual, prayer, sacrifice, invocation, libation, conjuration, witchcraft, exorcism, vision and contemplation”.

Institutional Media of communication use certain traditional institutions symbolically. Such traditional institutions include marriage, masquerade, shrine and chieftaincy; all these could be summed into social and spiritual institutions. Instrumental media of communication fall under the categories of instrument which when beaten or blown produces sounds and thus pass messages to those who are “initiated”. Wilson (1998, p. 28) subdivided the instrumental media of communication into aerophones, membranophones and idiophones.

Aerophones are instruments that produce sound when pressure or air is exerted into them. These sound produced serve as melodious tunes and sometimes it is a means of sending understandable messages or signals. Examples are – flutes and carved animal horns.

Membranophones are instruments made from skins of animals. The talking drum of the Yorubas is a good example of a membranophone.

Idiophone communication according to Wilson (1998, p. 28) involves the use of instruments which are self-sounding. Such instruments include the metal gong, wood lock, wooden drum, bell and rattle. It is on this premise that the study focuses on the wooden drum called *Adha-nehwu* of Egbu people in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State. Describing the wooden drum, Akpabot (1975) as cited in Wilson (1998) explains that the wooden drum is:

a hollowed out tree trunk made to produce two tones, it comes in different sizes and it is played with two beaters made out of bamboo... it can be played as a solo instrument by a specialist musician to transmit messages from the chief of the village in groups of two or three in an orchestra (p.28).

The Adha –Nehwu (wooden drum)

The *Adha-nehwu* is a large wooden drum carved out of a big tree. It has an opening in the middle that makes it possible for sound to be produced when beaten, and has a carved male human head embossed on the top of the wooden drum. The *Adha-nehwu* is traditionally situated in Umunwaeze, one of the eight villages that make up Egbu community in Etche ethnic nationality in Rivers State, Nigeria. The eight villages that make up Egbu are:

Oharigwe

Umuorji

Umuekeze
Umuoshie
Umuabakala
Ubana
Umusharam and
Umunwaeze.

Traditionally, the family of Umu-ele-azu-Nwaeze in Umunwaeze has the traditional responsibility of serving as the custodian and priest of the *Adha-nehwu*, and selection of who becomes the priest is neither done by age, nor by father-to-son inheritance. The chief priest, Ordu Edmund, explained in an interpersonal communication that:

The condition to serve this Adha-nehwu (pointing at the wooden image) is not by age, wealth, or by passing from father to son; the Adha-nehwu selects who serves it, and anybody serving the Adha-nehwu acts as the family head even if he is the youngest in the family.

The selection of who serves the *Adha-nehwu* is linked to extra-mundane mode of communication. According to Wilson (1998, p. 47), “this mode of communication is believed to take place between the living and supernatural or Supreme Being”. Thus the supreme beings choose who serve “them”. Before one is chosen, series of rituals, incantations, chants, invocations, libation, exorcism and sacrifice are performed.



Figure 1: The Adha- nehwu of the Egbu people

Functions of the *Adha–Nehwu*

Interpersonal Communication and interview with the people of Egbu reveal that the functions of the *Adha-nehwu* are unique. The *Adha-nehwu* puts the people on a high spirit, and moves them into action. It is to the people what the bugle is to the military.

One of the major functions of the *Adha-nehwu* is to mobilize the people in the event of danger or problem. As the name implies, it does not sound in vain; therefore, once the *Adha-nehwu* sounds, every male citizen within the influence of the sound is obliged to immediately respond to the call. The *Adha-nehwu* is seldom sounded unless for something very serious and of dire consequences such as war, invasion etc. Consequently, in some circumstances it is sounded just once in one's lifetime.



Figure 2: The Chief Priest demonstrating how the *Adha-nehwu* is beaten

Typical instances abound (as highlighted by the chief priest) where the *Adha-nehwu* was used to communicate messages of dire consequences to the people. A case in point was when a man from Egbu went on hunting expedition in company of other hunters from the neighboring community called Apani. In the course of the hunt, he was shot. The *Adha-nehwu* was sounded the next morning and the men came out in response to the urgent call. Once the *Adha-nehwu* sounds, the neighboring communities become terrified for fear of invasion until they know the reason for the sound.

Another case was when a member of the community drowned in the village river which was considered a taboo. The *Adha-nehwu* was also sounded; able bodied men were mobilized as search parties. If a member of the community goes to farm and does not return; first, the immediate family members try to find the person, and if to no avail, the family members notify the chief priest with cola nuts and hot drink, then he sounds the *Adha-nehwu*, and every male adult of the community must come out battle ready.

When a member of the community commits suicide by hanging which is considered a taboo, the *Adha-nehwu* is sounded to alert the town of the problem and possible looming danger since the land had been desecrated and the attention of a visitor or native doctor will be required to cut down the body. If a visitor brings down the body, he will leave the community immediately and will not come to the community forever, thus he will prepare his belongings before undertaking the task and he is handsomely rewarded.

The *Adha-nehwu* is only sounded between 4, 5 and 6 in the morning. According to the chief priest, the choice of between 4am, 5am and 6am is due to the fact that the period is considered quiet and calm as such the sound travels a long distance, however, if there is an urgent need to sound the *Adha-nehwu* before morning, the elders in the community try as much

as possible to manage the situation till early in the morning the next day before the *Adha-nehwu* is sounded.

When the *Adha-nehwu* sounds, it usually carries urgency in its tone, and the men in response are battle ready. This time, women and children are forbidden to participate

Limitations of the *Adha-Nehwu* as a Communication Channel

For decades, the *Adha-nehwu* has served a useful purpose in communicating vital information to the people of Egbu; however, it is not without limitations.

The *Adha-nehwu* is normally sounded in the morning between 4, 5 and 6. Under no circumstance should it be sounded at any other time of the day. This could pose a great danger to the community since that is the major source of disseminating very important information to the people. Delaying to communicate such information immediately could cause the life of more people in the community in the cause of invasion.

The mode of operation is another limitation. The chief priest is the only person who is allowed and mandated by the “gods” to carry out the functions of beating the *Adha-nehwu*, so, if he is sick and hospitalized, and there is need to sound the *Adha-nehwu*, what happens? This is better imagined.

Crave for development by communities enhances urbanization which comes along with roads, electricity and other amenities. Today, villages not connected to the national grid have electricity through their personal generator set. Thus, the noise emanating from the generator sets and high fidelity music equipment sometimes makes it difficult for messages passed through this medium (*Adha-nehwu*) to be effectively heard.

Wilson (1991) observes among many problems of traditional media that:

Some of the facilities of modern living restrict access to traditional media messages. The endless hum of the air-conditioner, the deafening peal of high fidelity music equipment or the sometimes cacophonous blare of vehicular traffic may make the penetration of message transmitted through traditional media in urban or semi-urban areas impossible
(p. 30).

Adha-nehwu extols the patriarchal system thereby excluding the female members and children of the community from getting involved in this channel of communication. When the *Adha-nehwu* sounds, women and children below 18years are forbidden from responding to the call. They are restricted to their rooms, or at most, within their respective compounds until the men return.

The preservation and replacement of these instruments is another limitation. Owing to deforestation, big trees that could readily serve as replacements are no longer there. According to the chief priest, the original *Adha-nehwu* was bigger than the one he inherited because of deforestation which has made it difficult to get very big trees needed to carve a replacement for the original one.

Lastly, the way and manner in which the priest is selected is linked to extramundane, that is to say; no Christian would want to participate in the service of *Adha-nehwu*. Interviews with some youths reveal that they are not willing to take up such responsibility of serving the *Adha-nehwu*. According to one of the interviewees:

It will be difficult for any young man to want to serve the Adha-nehwu, for one thing, there is no monetary value attached to the office and whoever is serving the Adha-nehwu will remain

perpetually in the village. No reasonable young man will dear do a thing like that. Additionally, the office and its services are not decent.

How *Adha-Nehwu* as a Traditional Means of Communication Can Be Improved

Communication, like the society is dynamic. Therefore, the mode of communication should also be dynamic. The *Adha-nehwu* as a means of communication should be used at any moment of the day when the need arises instead of waiting till the next day's morning before sounding the drum. One may argue that if beaten in the afternoon, people will not get the information. Well, that is possible; however, traditional news men could also be used to further disseminate the information at time like that if it is an urgent issue.

Though the choice of the chief priest of the *Adha-nehwu* is supernatural, and an exclusive preserve of the gods, yet demands should be made (from the gods) through incantations, libations or any other possible form through which the living communicate with the spirits to also provide for an assistant to the substantive chief priest.

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