

## The Talking Drum: An Inquiry into the Reach of a Traditional Mode of Communication

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### Abstract

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The talking drums are important instruments of communication in Traditional African society which serve as the voice of the whole community and communicate the aggregate of their desires. The talking drums are fashioned to enhance grassroots mobilization for developmental needs of the society. This paper undertakes a hermeneutical study of the talking drums in Africa. It argues that besides the understanding of the talking drums as instruments of communication, they can be regarded as living beings. Furthermore, the paper discusses the role of the talking drums as personified entity in African society. The paper states that traditional methods of communication must be revived in order to give room for a free flow of information which is indispensable for any development to thrive.

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**Keyword:** Talking Drum and Traditional Communication

### Introduction

Traditional communication is a vital human activity which touches every sphere of livelihood for meaningful development and peaceful co-existence in African society. It involves the acts of transmitting messages to channels which link people to their languages and symbolic codes through which information are impacted and shared from one person to another (Agbenu, 2007). The inquisitive nature of human beings to explore, socialize and develop has given him the opportunity to interact with his social, economic and political environment. This interaction is made possible only by the process of communication. In African society, traditional communication is the oldest form of communication channels. It is traditional in nature and it is as old as the creation itself (Ayoo, 2007). Ebeze (2002) opines that traditional communication was the product of interplay between traditional communities, customs and conflicts, harmonies and strife, cultural convergences and divergences, interpersonal relations, symbols, codes and moral traditions. It recognized the existence of traditional structures and channels of communications used are verbal and symbolic aspects of interpersonal and group communication such as town crier, talking drums, gong, among others (Ugboajah, 1985). The verbal channel of communication consists of spoken words and channels such as religious groups, tribal associations, market place, chiefs and so forth. While the non-verbal channels of communication includes idiophones gongs, bells, rattles or Arephone, fresh unfolding palm fronts, decorated raffia and cryptic writing (Ayoo, 2007). Memberanphone include forms of skin or leather drum. Some of its distinguishing characteristics includes: the affinity between participants in the communication process, the perceived credibility of source that derives from respect of the institution of the message source, ability of the audience to talk back almost immediately and simultaneously (Ayoo, 2007).

In many African societies, the talking drums serve as potent channel of traditional communication. They are the most efficient traditional communication method used in villages and rural areas to enhance grassroots mobilization for society's development. Since no development could adequately take place without the rural dwellers being involved, it was obvious that a familiar communication channel known to them can affect this change. However, communities in the rural areas that constituted about 80% of African population have partially being shout out of this very vital process of human development.

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As such their major means of communication is usually the traditional modes of communication which is the crux of this study. It is the interest of the researcher therefore, to ascertain the effectiveness of the talking drums as one of the vital channels of traditional communication, its developmental tendencies, and how it can be imbedded into the modern forms of communication of a greater development.

### Conceptual Clarifications

The two concepts that need clarifying are the "Talking Drums" and "Traditional Communication". The clarifications of these concepts will better our understanding of the issues under discussion.

### The Talking Drums

Talking drums are African drums whose pitch can be regulated depending upon how the drummer strikes the sound of the drum and changes its tension. These pitches can mirror those of a person's voice, and thus, the drums are called "talking drums" (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). In Mali, for example, the drums have historically been used for four main purposes first, they are used by jellis or griots charged with orally recording, preserving, and sharing their community's histories and culture (Gehman, 1987). The jellis used the drums as memory devices to help them remember important people and events. Second, talking drums are used to communicate messages across distances and villages (Mbiti, 1971). A king or other political authority may send a drummer throughout his land as a messenger. The drummer plays or beats his drum, and because the villagers know the "language of the drum", they understand if the king is issuing a warning, a celebratory invitation, or some other news (Mbiti, 1969). Third, talking drums are also used during religious rituals often; jellis and griots ran these ceremonies and used the talking drums not only for celebration, but also for sacred rites and stories. Fourth, talking drums are used to bring people together and to help settle disputes among members of a village (Hobley, 1910). Although cell phones, radios, television, and the internet have largely replaced the need for talking drums as a primary means of communication, drums and jellis remain an important part of Mali culture. The drums are now used more for celebration and entertainment than for communication, yet jellis continue to be respected by members of the society, and are considered keepers of African, especially Mali tradition. In many African cultures, the talking drums are the cultural instruments that have endured and survived generations. In Nigeria for instance, talking drum is used in notifications or alerts and entertainment in palaces and most ceremonies.

The Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and Tiv are incomplete without the use of talking drums (Ushe, 2010). The drums originated in West Africa down to Nigeria where the drums are still played today mostly by Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and the Tiv peoples. They are thought to mimic language by closely imitating the rhythms and into nations of the spoken word. The drums have a distinctive hourglass shape with a drum head at each end made from animal hide mostly goatskin. The drum's body is made of wood, with leather cords running the full length of the drum to connect the two drum heads. The drums vary in size and name between different cultures, but tend to be fairly small. For instance, the Yoruba, the smallest type of talking drum is called a *gangan* and the largest is called the *dundun*, meaning "sweet sound". They are known with different names such as; *gangan*, *dundun*, *atumpan*, *donno*, *kalangu*, *dodo*, and *junna* (Idowu, 1973). The talking drum's ability to imitate the total sound of language has made it superior to any of those drums that existed before it. The drum was purposefully invented to send messages, since it can talk and sing, that is how it became a musical instrument (Idowu, 1973). The talking drum is held under the left arm when playing and sound is produced by hitting the drum with a bent stick or squeezing the leather cords; this causes the drum heads to tighten and emit a high pitch. The act of squeezing the drum changes the pitch and gives off various notes. The harder the drum is squeezed, the higher the note will be. This is achieved by first hitting the drum head with the stick and then using the free hand to dampen and change tones immediately afterwards. The Tiv drums perform multifarious functions that are noted in the soul of the community as the ritual symbolism of the Tiv drum is all pervading. In ancient times, the talking drum was used in historic Ti society for a variety of purposes from being a musical instrument during celebrations, to a sort of telegram for relaying messages during times of war or to announce the arrival of a visitor. It was invented in *swem karagbe* as a means of communication before the invention of writing and it was assembled for chiefs and village heads, as their musical outfit whenever they go to wars, to motivate their army. The talking drum was also used to communicate or announced the news of death in the community (Ushe, 2005). The drums take the following tones; The talking drums are the cultural instruments which have endured and survived the test of time up to the present generation.

The history of the talking drums is as old as creation itself. In many parts of Africa, the talking drums are used as means of notification, alertness and entertainment of people in palaces or during ceremonies (Melvin, 1975). As the name suggests, the talking drums are thought to mimic languages by closely imitating the rhythms and intonations of the spoken words. The pitches of the talking drums can be regulated depending upon how the players strikes the heads of the drums and change their tension. These pitches can mirror people voices, and thus, the drums are called "talking drums" (Ushe, 2010). The talking drums have historically been used for many purposes, which includes: to communicate messages across distances and villages, bring people together, help settle disputes among members of a village and to serve as memory device to help people remember important events that took place in African society (Nketia, 1963). Today, the talking drums are use to praise or curse other people and to welcome guests, praise the gods and people in the society, invoke the spirits of ancestors and deities, correct the errors of the societies, generates conversational proverbs in order to allow people to communicate with their elders and is still part of royal ceremonies or recitals of ancestry (Ushe, 2007). The talking drums are also use during festivals, installation of Obas or Chiefs, naming ceremonies, marriage or burial ceremonies of important personalities in African traditional society (Ebeze, 2002). The talking drums warm and limit the Obas or Kings from wrong doings and make them conscious of their deeds. One of the unique features of the talking drum instruments is their abilities to closely intimate the rhythms and intonations of the spoken language. The drums reproduce the sounds of proverbs or praise songs through a skilled performers or specialized "drum language" (Nwosu, 2007). The specific pattern of drumming and rhythms is closely linked with spiritual beings or Ogun associated with the traditional Yoruba belief system originally celebrated in Nigeria and some areas of Ghana as elucidated by Nketia (1963) thus: The Akan communities highly regard the talking drum and his drummer who play the "atumpan", or Akan form of the talking drum. He is considered the greatest of all drummers because of the breath of his knowledge; the skill which his work demands and the role he plays as a leading musician in all ensembles in which the atumphan drums are used. Nketia's presentation above indicates the fact that the talking drums are frequently understood by a knowledgeable audience and they have the abilities to move people to actions in African society.

### **Traditional Communication**

The word communication denotes a source and extension of imagination in forms that can be learned and shared. It is the production, perception and understanding of messages about what is happening or is about to happen or has already happened (Ayoo, 2007). On the other hand, the word "traditional" refers to a system that is old, naïve, archaic, indigenous and unmodified (Ushe, 2010). Traditional communication therefore refers to: The process of dissemination of information, ideas and attitudes by certain specialized institutions set up for that purpose. It focuses on the exchange of information or messages that have traditional undertones. Traditional communication was an important activity which touches every sphere of human life, bringing people, cultures, communities and races closer for meaningful development and peaceful co-existence (Bello, 1991). It is the process of social interaction that helps people to understand themselves and live harmoniously as organized people of a given state, country or nation (Melvin, 1975). Nwosu (1990) defines traditional communication as: A process that uses signs, symbols and other means to bring about inter-exchange of thoughts, and meaning between and among individuals and groups for a better understanding and relation. Traditional communication was the only process that elevated human beings above all God's creation on earth (Folarin, 1998). God himself use it at various times when He communicated effectively with the children of Israel, using signs such as pillar of clouds, light, and so forth. It is a potent and efficient channel of communication used in pre-literate society and it is still relevant in contemporary time. Ebeze (2002) therefore, defines traditional communication as:

The product of interplay between traditional communities, customs and conflicts, harmonious and strife, cultural convergences and divergences, interpersonal relations, symbols, codes and moral traditions. It recognizes the existence of traditional structures and channels of communication used as verbal and symbolic aspect of interpersonal and group communication such as town crier, drum, gong and so forth. The verbal communication consists of spoken words and channel such as religious groups, tribal associations, market place, chiefs, among others, while the non-verbal includes idiophones-gongs, bells, rattles or Arephone, fresh unfolding palm fronts, decorated raffia, and cryptic writing (Melvin, 1975). Memanphone include forms such as skin or leather drums and their distinguishing characteristics include: the affinity between participants in the communication, the perceived credibility of source that derives from respect of the institution of the message source, and the ability of audience to talk back almost immediately and simultaneously (Kombol, 2001).

### **Traditional Communication in African Worldview**

Traditional communication is important information dissemination in Africa and other parts of the world. Ayoo (2008) asserts that traditional communication is made up of diverse channels which have continued to exist in the contemporary African society. Some of these channels include: town criers, gunshots, drawing on the cave walls, thick cloud smoke and talking drums. The town criers were used to summon elders or age groups in the society to assemble at the village square for some social or political activities (Finnegan, 1979). The town crier had some unique messages which not many people could understand their meanings, except the indigenes of the societies concerned. In Igbo society, for example, town criers disseminated their messages in the nights, mornings or afternoons, depending on when it was seen as convenient (Nkotia, 1963). The town criers method of traditional communication is criticised by people in modern times because of its small area of coverage which can hardly go beyond three villages at times. Gunshots have a wider coverage more than town criers and were used to announce the death of very important political and religious leaders in African societies (Beltran, 1974). They were also used to announce the final trauing of new rulers, remind the people of an impending danger and summoning emergency meeting to take urgent decisions on issues demanding immediate attention in African traditional society. Among the Tiv, Idoma and Jukun, for example, gunshots played political, religious and social functions of announcing the completion of final burial formalities of every important or elderly person in the society (Ushe, 2010). The only problem with gunshots method of traditional communication was that it has numerous reasons for which it is shot and this becomes difficult for a person to know which gunshot is for an impending danger, burial ceremony, or the trauing of a chief since the meaning of each gunshot is not clear enough until one gets to where it was shot.

The drawing on the cave walls was the method of traditional communication used by craftsmen who employed their skills to give concrete shapes and forms to what animated the man's mind in the process and stirred the imagination of their tribes (Ayoo, 2007). The art serves the social function of relating individual imagination and vision to the common consciousness of an indigenous culture. It also indicates the social and political moods of the society at the time and creates good historical art-facts (Nwosu, 1990). The drawing on the cave walls method of traditional communication was limited to a small population and as such some of the messages were difficult for people to understand. Sometimes the gunshot attracted little attention from the people. It could therefore be said that the present cartoon and magazines draw their origin from the cave wall drawings of traditional societies. The thick cloud of smoke method of traditional communication had the message to put across in African society. The thick smoke, on a hot afternoon, indicates the urgent need of the community; while, a thick white smoke, that went straight into the air, indicates that a prominent son of the community had been either killed or kidnapped by the enemy (Nketia, 1963). A village council meeting was therefore summoned immediately through this smoke. The problem with this method of traditional communication was that it was difficult to send a cloud of smoke into the sky when it was raining. It was also limited by the fact that a huge amount of firewood is needed to pass a message across. More importantly, it makes easy for the enemy to know the preparations of his neighbours during war through the smoke (Finnegan, 1979).

### **The Relevance of Talking Drums as a Channel of Traditional Communication in Africa**

The talking drums occupy an important position in African society. It is the most useful method of traditional communication which helps in information dissemination in African society. Finnegan (1979) affirms that the talking drums are divided into two: First, it could be through conventional code where pre-arranged singular represented a given message. In this type, there was no directly linguistic basis for the communication. And second, it used African drum literature where the instruments communicate through direct representation of a spoken language itself, stimulating the tone and rhythm of actual speech (Beltran 1974). The instruments themselves are regarded as speaking and these messages consist of words. Such communication, unlike that through conventional signals, intended as a linguistic one and can be fully understood by translating it into words and any musical effects were purely incidental. The drums are constructed in a special way as to give different tones at different intervals and the intelligibility of the message to the hearer is also sometimes increased by the rhythmic pattern, differently representing that of a spoken utterance.

In this method there are conventional occasions and types of communication for transmission on the drum so that the listener has some idea of the range of meanings that are likely at any given time. More significant are the stereotyped phrases used in drum communication. Among the Tiv of North Central Nigeria, the talking drums is the traditional method of communication that was used to formalize announcements about impending danger, birth, deaths, marriages, forthcoming hunts or wrestling matches. For example, the talking drums were played at the death of an important political leader to announce, give special alert, or signal to members of the community concerning the news of such death. The drums (Indyer/Ilyu) were drummed or beaten in the following language:

Akperakaa gba gede, gede, gede  
Takurukuu Anyam Adzenga

Won sha kumun ngu van sha kumun u tamen vande tire jighil jighil keghen wangôu ngu van sha kumun u tamen tire kôr un.

The literate translation of this message from the ceremonial drum is as follows:

Takuruku, Tiger cat in the world above wait, attends, Takuruku,  
Wait for your brother, who is on his way to the place of the great,  
Takuruku, wait to attend, wait for your brother who is on the way,  
Anyamazenga, wait to attend,  
Wait for your brother who is on his way to the great beyond (Ushe, 2010).

Any Tiv person of adult age who heard the mystical drum (Indyer/Ilyu) played this tone understood that death had occurred in the society. It was a solemnized passionate appeal to the great ancestor of the Tiv (Takuruku) that another spirit of a dead member of the Tiv is on its way to the ancestral world (Adomoku). The drum also helped the Tiv to invoke the ancestors and to make others aware of the fact that the Tiv traditional religion contains the idea of the after-life. This ancestral abode in Tiv understanding is the place where all the departed souls, including other non-Tiv, go after death (Ushe, 2005). Besides messages and announcements, the talking drum language was used as the most common forms of expression. Among the Hausa and Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, praise names and titles of rulers were poured forth on the drums or horns as a way of information dissemination. This shows that every human society has its indigenous and traditional modes and channels of communication which characterise its existence, organization and development. These communication modes and channels form the basis upon which the communities, especially the rural community, progress, policy makers, planners and administrators, desirous to effect functional economic and social changes must first identify such community communication modes and channels and utilize them to provide the people with maximum information about such changes. Communication, whether traditional or scientific, the transmission of information most from the focus point of origin source of another destination which is blood stream of every community.

Traditional forms of communication which are mythology, storytelling, song, proverbs, artistic, musical, dance, religious customs and theatrical elements, pottery, textiles and wool art are owned by the society. The village clan heads only act as trustees and heads of the gate keeping process. Even in the case of extra-mundane communication, that is communication between the living and the dead, the supernatural or spiritual beings the mode of communication is done through incarnation, spiritual chants, ritual, prayers, sacrifice, invocation, séance, trance, hysterics or liberation of the head of society. This multi-dimensional form of communication and transaction has become more pervasive in all African societies. The introduction of western education and Christianity has infiltrated the process of traditional communication, particularly the practice of the sacred drums to the extent that many people no longer cherished their long time value in the society. In some African societies such as the Tiv, Igbo, Edo, among others, the traditional practice of the sacred drum has been adopted and conceptualised by Christianity. In Tiv society, for example, the Catholic choir groups have adopted the notion and composed a Christian burial sonnet and inserted the name Jesus (Yesu) and God (Aôndo) where the name of Takuruku should be as follows: Yesu Kristu, Yesu tile jigh jigh keghen wan igyô, wan ingyô ngu kôndon sha kuman u tamen mbatyomou kôndon sha kumon u tamen mbatyomou cii ve kegh un gbenda mbajigh jigh cica ve kegh un gbenda.

This is translated as:

Jesus Christ, Your son is on his way Jesus Christ, wait, attend to your brother your brother is ascending to the Great high way, let all angels welcome him, let all Saints welcome him (Ushe, 2010). This fact indicates that the process of religious change has occurred in Tiv indigenous religion and cosmology, which has experienced a radical conceptualisation into Christianity. Among the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, the talking drums are personified as human beings. Thus, on certain public occasion's personal names, genealogies and unique characteristics of people are expressed in drum language. Sometime, the full name of a man could be "the spitting cobra whose virulence never abates, like son of the bad spirit with the spear" (Ushe, 2007). Kombol (2001) affirms that when an African man hears his name drummed or praised in song he must jump up for joy even from his sick bed. Ayoo (1991) corroborated that drummed songs can be used to report, comment on current affairs, propaganda and to reflect or mould public opinion in traditional African society. The drummed songs package messages in culturally acceptable and persuasive formats and deliver the information on a popular medium of communication. Nketia (1963) explained further that drummed song's maker could use his singing power to make even an ugly woman to feel beautiful and a beautiful woman of feel ugly. Such was the power that the traditional communication had as a personified being and because of that African people feared to reject a song maker request, even for marriage". Finnegan (1977) asserts that drummed songs represent an indirect way of traditional communication with someone in power. The drummed songs also represent an attempt to influence while at the same time avoiding the open danger of speaking directly. The conventionality of the songs makes it possible to indicate publicly what could not be said privately or indirectly to a man's faced.

In this connection therefore, human songs represent a powerful method of traditional communication in which resistance to public policies is registered and the mobilization for certain things is made easier. The drummed songs played two major functions which include that of propagation or image daunting and mobilization for political activities or support. Songs are also used to reduce the political influence of opponents and to increase the level of solidarity within the conflicting. Even in agrarian African communities, songs were used on the farm in order to increase the speed of work and avoid unnecessary division of attention. The use of songs however, has been either positive or negative, depending on side from where one is coming. Even in contemporary era, songs have continued to play significant role in the process of traditional communication and mobilization. Songs such as eulogy and panegyric were also used to express the dreadfulness of death, the menace of witchcraft and the craftiness of the witches/wizards who kill people who are useful. The singer laments that if such a richly endowed person dies, which else shall be generous to open his money bag for him, a poor singer, to draw money at will. The philanthropic tone sometimes comes out clearly in the following Obadiah's presentation: Gbo gba! Mta inyamikume ivan iyol, me leva meg her I miar yam me ter mude yaaya! Kpage Tseun msagher ye, Yaaya nam ikondo er mta uya! Yaaya nam inyaregh! Which means, Gbogbo! I have shot a game with an arrow!; let me hail the person to disable it. I am rejoicing because my flute has eulogised, munde Yaaya kpage Tseun Yaaya gave me a sac-clothe to lie around my stomach! Yaaya gave me a wristwatch; Yaaya gave me money! (Ushe, 2005:46-47). In songs such as exemplified above, the singers drive home the importance of dirges and its adverse effects on the Nigerian society in contemporary times.

### **The Role of Traditional Modes of Communication in Contemporary African Society**

Traditional methods of communication play many roles in the development of African society. Some of these roles include: First, it paves way for socialization which is itself a process and experience that helps individual to become sensitive to the expectations of others and to accept the values of one's family and culture. Traditional modes of communication provides this common front of knowledge which helps people to operate and interact freely since they are sub-groups that exist in each community, thereby quick acceptance and quick development. Second, good method of traditional communication creates a fertile ground for the emergence of good and people oriented development (Ayoo, 2007). It is through precise traditional communication methods that the intentions and directions of society programmes can be understood (Ikenga-Metuh, 1981). Second, traditional methods of communication stores up and promote cultural heritage of the people. These cultural futures mobilize and motivate people by disseminating and propagating ideas which promote society pride, solidarity and unity. Third, through the concrete feedback system, traditional modes of communication promote debate and discussion forum where the rural dwellers interact with their agents, age grades, chiefs, among others.

This forum allows the rural to interact with the rule educating them of their policies and listening to their aspirations, opinions, objections and programmes (Abubakar, 1989). This forum of interactive process paves way for mobilization which is unified into a common goal. Fourth, formal education becomes easy with the use of traditional channels of communication. The educational agents make use of local print and electronic media such as; rural news papers, town criers, talking drums, among others and anchoring special national programmes such as; immunization of children against deadly diseases, improved agriculture and the likes. This stimulates participation and provides opportunity for diversified cultural expressions which are unified into a common goal. Thus, for traditional communication to flow, language of the people must be given consideration. As Abubakar (1989:94) noted: Language is a powerful instrument used to keep alive and pass on society's heritage of oral tradition and a symbol for identity. It remains the major factor in solving the complex and various requirements of modern communication needs because language is a powerful instrument in development. People go on well quite easily with those who seek their language even though may not belong to the same community. So the most devastating thing to befall a community is to deprive the members of using their language by imposition of foreign language which is alien and distant from them in space and culture. For this is tantamount to genocide. Abubakar's presentation above clearly indicates the strength of traditional modes of communication which lays in the use of the people's language. From time immemorial to contemporary times, people have used languages in traditional communication to transmit information from one community to another. This has helped in enhancing unity and peaceful co-existence among people in African society in contemporary time (Bello, 1991).

### **Conclusion**

The paper has successfully discussed the talking drums as the channel of traditional communication in Africa and other parts of the developing countries. This channel of communication has been refined and enhanced for better productivity in the society. The talking drums have also been used as personified beings with names, songs and language to translate information to members of a given society. Even with the invasion of modernism and forces of social change the different methods of traditional communication are still use by people to bridge the gaps in the rural and urban areas. This form of traditional communication paves way for interactive process and mobilization which to large extent leads to society's development. Based on the above facts, the paper recommends, among others, the followings:

- (i) There is need to refined and modified traditional methods of communication in order to enhance development in the society.
- (ii) The traditional modes of communication should be given high level of literacy in the rural areas to bridge communication gaps between the village and urban dwellers.
- (iii) Modern means of communication such as microphones, radio, television, newspapers and the like should be introduced to replace traditional channels of communication such as the talking drums, gunshots, songs, and thick cloud of smoke in Africa and other parts of the developing countries.
- (iv) There is need to overhaul traditional channels of communication such as gunshots, the talking drums and songs which were limited in coverage and easily affordable to allow grassroots information dissemination in the society.

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