

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: The Use of Indigenous Entertainment Forms for Participatory and Sustainable Development in Rural Communities.

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Abstract



Indigenous Knowledge Systems are the local knowledge systems that are unique to a given culture. The information base of a society which facilitates communication and decision making are all areas that help in developing a community. Some development strategists in Africa and elsewhere in the developing countries are now paying attention to indigenous culture which they hitherto believed hindered development and therefore must be ignored in contemporary development programmes. The same critics of indigenous knowledge systems are now calling for modifications within the cultural systems to support modern development and change. Cultural variables are now perceived as very important tool in any attempt to generate behavioral change among people and therefore must receive attention. This paper considers especially the communicative potency of folk media for participatory and sustainable development as against the sometimes cynical reference to popular art-forms as conduits for mere entertainment. It will also seek to explore the pessimism with which Indigenous Knowledge and Communication Systems in Africa are viewed. It further contends that, even in a media environment saturated with Western approaches to technology practices, traditional media still have a role to play. Attention is also paid to the importance of combining the traditional African and Western media systems in producing and delivering development communication, and projects, that the two systems can be complementary and indeed can accomplish much more in cohesion than either on its own.

Introduction

One of the major questions in development communication today concerns how communication systems can be organized so as to increase participation, achieve self reliance, promote equity, and close communication gaps (Hedebro 1982, p.126)

Communication researchers believe that existing knowledge systems have failed to promote and serve the needs of sustainable development in Africa. The failure they feel is due to the top-down-approach of disseminating information to rural communities without the people's participation in the formulation of the content of the message. In a bid to remedy the above situation, there is a new attempt to explore new paradigms which are significant for popular participation in development programs

"The new paradigm seeks to emphasize the quality of life-integration of traditional and modern systems of communication-labour intensive and appropriate technology-self reliant-user oriented strategies-popular participation in development planning and implementation," (Wang and Dissanake, 1982, p.7)

The art-forms which constitute one of the vital aspects of the indigenous knowledge systems have been identified as one of the mediums the use of which could lead towards the realization of these objectives. The reasons advanced are that, it has the potential for being a democratic medium, in which the beneficiaries may play an active role in medium programming, and consequently in producing and distributing messages.

As the African experience advances towards the twenty-first millennium, the evidence is that there is still a lack of interest in indigenous knowledge systems and modes of communication. In consequence, little effort has been made to develop these indigenous models of communication. In her study of traditional forms of communication in India, Malik(1982) began with the assumption that:

"Folk media have the potential for use as channels of communication" and concluded "there was little or no doubt expressed Folk media can be very effectively utilized to convey relevant messages"

However, regardless of the lack of enthusiasm among African scholars to research into indigenous knowledge systems, such forms of systems which characterized the pre-literate African societies are considered appropriate in contemporary terms. In fact they are considered appropriate enough to be applied as support devices for education and development. Over the years, certain aspects of the culture and traditions of indigenous peoples have actually been identified as being relevant to contemporary development process. According to Ansu-Kyeremeh (1997, p.4)

“Development relates to improving the life situation of an individual or a community. Actions, activities and amenities related to development are, therefore, designed to meet people’s needs while improving ways in which they organize their lives. Improvement is to be measured in terms of quality of life and not simply in Gross National Product (GNP) numbers. What matters in the case of the rural people then is their ability to identify, transform, and utilize resources available to them to improve upon their living conditions.

Indigenous Knowledge and Development

Cultural variables are now perceived as very important in any attempt to generate behavioral change among people and I believe that these variables must receive due attention in any developmental effort for it to be sustainable. Nat Colletta (1980, p.17) rightly stressed that:

A culture based development strategy enables new knowledge and skills and attitudes to be introduced within the framework of existing knowledge, cultural patterns, institutions, values and human resources. Indeed, the indigenous culture is the fabric within which development can be woven

This recognition of the importance of cultural variables in development has generated worldwide interest in the traditional indigenous knowledge systems and media especially the popular performing arts and entertainment forms in the promotion of development. Development is centered around people. People cannot be developed, they can only develop themselves. People’s participation and self-reliance are vital ingredients in development. This fact, in the African view, makes apparent the potential of indigenous knowledge systems especially folk media forms such as popular entertainment, festivals theatre, drama, oral tradition, folk plays, music, dance, mime, signs and symbols, folk entertainments or popular theatre, in promoting self reliance and sustainable development. These popular knowledge systems provide the avenue to address local interest and concerns in the language and idioms which the people are familiar with and understand, they are the appropriate communication channels for the people. Dialogue is the essence of any work in communication for development. Folk media has quickly been recognized as one way of ensuring such a dialogue. By folk, we mean the common people also referred to as villagers, rural, downtrodden, the masses who live in rural communities. Media will be taken to mean the vehicle through which messages are carried from one end to another end. Folk media will therefore be taken to refer to the common vehicle the common people or rural communities employ for the delivery of their message.

Any development-oriented ideas disseminated through local media systems (folk media) are more likely to involve and motivate a larger number of community members to participate in the development process. Scholars in the field of development communication believe that the success of any sustainable development requires popular participation and

"Any communication media that are popular tend to be more effective in stimulating such participation than ones that are not" (Ingle 1972, p.5).

Ingle again stresses that:

"In order to convey message with effect, one has to use the language, symbols and styles familiar to the audience" (Ingle 1972, p.30).

Another scholar opined that

"Attitude change is more persistent over time if the receiver actively participates in, rather than passively receives the communication" (Zimbardo and Ebbesen 1969, p.23).

Again these findings on the indigenous knowledge systems have really convinced scholars like Ingle (1972) of the advantages of using these knowledge systems in promoting development in largely rural and illiterate populations. In his view:

These traditional media are not merely a form of art expression but are a way of expressing knowledge in a manner which is acceptable and functional. The poorest man in the land has access to his culture, expressed either in a story, poem, play, song, dance, proverb, custom ritual, rites or a variety of other ways characteristic of folk culture (Ingle 1972, p.29)

These theatrical ideas are reflected in the advantages which folk media have over modern mass media in promoting participatory development in rural areas in Ghana. Compared with modern mass media, the folk media are more familiar and closer to the ordinary people at the grassroots level and this fact would seem to make them more effective channels through which the ordinary folk can be presented with new and development ideas. Majority of the people live in rural areas and as such have been able to have unique way of disseminating meaningful information. The folk media of the people should be created by them and should be participatory in that, the people should have an input in its creation and in so doing will be able to induce development. An example will be given of the media of storytelling sessions found in most rural communities of Ghana. In this the main character of the stories is Kwaku Ananse (The Spider). After all is done during the day, people (old and young) will all

gather in an open courtyard mostly by a fireside to listen to these stories which are told by elderly men and women. The essence of the session is not only for entertainment but also education about the history of the people, their belief system. The stories also have moral lessons in them where good will always triumph over evil. Children are always entreated to manage their time well and to respect elders. These story sessions are traditional theatrical performances which allow people to take up roles to buttress a point for easy comprehension by participants. It also encourages communal mobilization and living. Sometimes elders will look at the attitudes of people and tell stories to correct those attitudes without mentioning the person's name. The essence of these are also duplicated riddles, proverbs, songs, dance, games, and among others. Media such as newspapers, television, and the internet do not effectively reach these people. Many research studies show, these media do not have the required impact in terms of motivating change and development. The electronic medium may also not be understood by all the listening public and also may not get the active response of the listener for clarification, so that people are not involved in the solution of their problems, it rather becomes an imposition than a collective agreement. Radio, Film, Television, Seminars are all means of given information to a group of people, but the question here is, what is the purpose of given the information? Is the information to inform, educate or to entertain? Communication with a people is in terms of sharing, action and reaction. The electronic medium uses the top-down approach whereby "the-know-all-people" give instructions to the lower class. It may only be good for propounding theories and philosophical thinking. It could also be used to solve problems at the general level and not and not for a unique concern. This is because, the problem being discussed may not be relevant to all the cross section of the listening public. The high rate of illiteracy added to the inadequate reach of the modern mass media has left in its wake the passive involvement of rural people in decision making that affect their lives. Folk arts and traditional indigenous knowledge systems are the aesthetic components of the concepts of belonging and affinity in a cultural context. In traditional societies, the arts are an integral part of the process of living in the community. The Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Education in its quest to be more closer to the community has been organizing community theatre programs to create awareness and conscientise community members on their civic responsibilities. There have been successes in this case. A perfect example will be cited of the Sankor and the Pomadze experiences in 2011 and 2012. These are two different communities in the Central region of Ghana. The problem at Sankor was about sanitation and the people's attitude towards it. It was found out that nobody in the community was willing to offer a piece of land for a refuse container to be put on it. Research conducted showed that the attitude of the people contributed to the poor sanitation they face. They also thought that it was the work of their chief and government to keep the environment clean. There was conflict between

the chief and his people on land sales. They accused the chief of selling land meant for social amenities. They also had the notion that things must be done for them free. They did not see the need for them to pay money before they use a toilet facility within the community, they will prefer to ease themselves into polythene bags and throw them around or dirty the environment without any cause to them. The solution was for the people to change their attitude and keep the community clean. A drama was created around the problem. The community members were part of the research team to identify issues. These issues were prioritized in order of preference since some of them were recurring. The idea was to have a felt need that will concern all of them. With the community members participating, a story was created with characters, conflict, plot and other elements of drama. The story centered on sanitation, co-operation literacy and health. Also the story was simply dramatized. Being a genre that is created by the people, for the people and with the people, the characters were not people selected from outside the community, but from within the community itself. Members of the selected community group discussed the story and plot of the action and allocated parts to weave their own relevant dialogue and place their own interpretations on roles during the performance. There was also no need to look for a sophisticated stage of a city theatre type not available in rural areas. Rather we used as stage any open space in the village square. The drama was short but full of interesting action for the audience to comment on. After the performance was a post performance discussion on events in the play and how it affects their life. There was a collective agreement on community mobilization to solve their problems. Through this rural drama mostly depends on its intimate relation to local customs and traditions. The impact of the Sankor project was evident in the activities they undertook to ensure that the sanitation problem was solved. A community member released a piece of land for a refuse container to be put on the Zoomlion Company at Winneba has donated big container to that effect. People have stopped indiscriminate defecating and are now keeping the community clean. The Pomadze project in 2012 also centered on the Savings culture. It used the same participatory rural appraisal with drama as an intervention to help the community members on the need to save money for future use. This project also helped the people to establish a rural bank to help in money mobilization.

These popular entertainment or folk media are personal forms of entertainment as well as channels of communication, the folk media such as traditional drama, festivals, storytelling, folk singing and dances, are an effective part of the way of life of the people and thus provide fruitful means of disseminating ideas to them.

Again, being grassroots entertainment media, they cover primary and intimate social groups and any message they carry reach such groups and therefore, reach the well

established communication network of any community. For social change and development, what is required is a change in beliefs and the value systems of individuals, thus making them more adaptive and responsive to organic evolution and growth.

Traditional modes of communication deal with the values and beliefs of the people and this would seem to make them useful means through which social engineers can bring about behavioral changes in people such as adopting practices that will better improve their lifestyles. In every society there is a continuity of thought and action which is safeguarded by sanctions against those members of society who refuse to follow the accepted modes of behaviors that are laid down for them in the culture. These sanctions may be corporal such as death or spiritual resulting in severe illness or social culminating in banishment or ridicule. Deep down every citizen is a firmly rooted love for his or her traditional values, beliefs, and language practices techniques and among other things. Taboos or forbidden acts and things sacred are therefore instituted to curb some form of behaviors which may go contrary to accepted norms of society. We must however understand that taboo or forbidden acts are culture specific. What may be a taboo in society (A) may not be considered a taboo in another society. In view of this, it is almost impossible to treat all taboos in general. An action is either prohibited or it is allowed. Any infringement of a taboo or a forbidden act is held by the community as a criminal offence, and the offender dealt with severely by the society. Other violations of taboos are sometimes settled privately or if and where is the norm, retaliation. Some Akan societies consider adultery, robbery, slander, murder, having sex with animals, having sex in the bush and to have a child out of wedlock as taboo or forbidden act which must be punished severely. Some people are even banished from committing those acts. Other breaches include having sexual inter course with a woman impregnated by another man, sexual intercourse with a minor, intercourse with a woman who is menstruating, sexual intercourse with even your own wife in the open, incest. It is taboo in some Akan communities to insult the chief in public, treason, to steal royal or shrine paraphernalia, saying bad things about other people and engaging in acts perceived to be at variance with acts instituted by the society to guard its existence. In some Akuapem communities taboos such as one not to go to the farm on certain days of the week, it is a taboo to wash in a stream, defecate around river bodies and for one to bring bunch items from the farm. These were values and beliefs seeped ion the people's culture. Taboos may fulfill many other functions. For example it served to assign meanings to a cause such as matters of poor crop yield, lost battles and among others. If something goes wrong and one is unable to trace its source, one can always take consolation in the fact that probably the person has or someone else has unwillingly broken a taboo. This is because people's values and beliefs play major roles in their acceptance or rejection of change. Unlike modern mass media programmes which are usually produced for

large and diverse audiences, the folk media can use local dialects to disseminate ideas in a most intimate and down-to-earth way at the village level in the rural areas. The significance of folk arts in social and political communication was felt and recognized by a one time Indian Ruler Jawaharal Nehru who once said;

I am greatly interested in the development of a people's theatre in India. I think there is a great room for it, provided it is based on the people and their traditions. Otherwise it is likely to function in the air. It is a peoples approach. Nevertheless, I think an effort should be made in that direction (IPTA bulleting, 1943).

This thinking greatly impresses upon us that folk media should be an integral part of any communication programme for rural people and development. Wherever possible, these should be integrated with mass media but in all cases, integration with ongoing extension work is vital. The pre-requisite for the use of the indigenous knowledge systems and folk media are for one to have an understanding of the rural audience and the use of these media to provide rural people with entertainment in order to attract their attention and to ensure participation in development activities. Popular Theatre is said to be a practical way of translating theoretical principles into realities. It is a means of participatory research. Research is a tool for social transformation and a tool for change where one can find both information and solution. Popular theatre stands for collective implementation of collective need. That is it uses the peoples own music, proverbs wise, sayings, dance and puppetry, and folk medium entertainment. Its usage is able to engage and hold interest and becomes an important tool communication tool, as it uses the horizontal communication approach where ideas and dialogue are exchanged freely. Theatre allows many illiterates to participate directly in their development. It is comprehensible for the individual. People identify with the situation and everybody is given the chance to contribute freely towards the changing of the situation. Also by engaging in research to identify the problem, the play demonstrates the real social problem and fearlessly creates the awareness of the suffering of the masses. It dynamically presents existing realities, projects positive values like the organization, communal spirit and develops solidarity. It is critical. Through dialogue one is able to unearth problems and causes of the problem. Popular theatre is free. It is taken to the people at a time everybody is around. Its nature of being cyclical goes to identify them as a group of people with a collective need. It uses a lot of improvisation and there is no alienation of actor and audience, everybody around can chip in comments on the situation presented. The language used here is the local dialect which addresses the specific needs of the people. The performing arts have been used for educational purposes for generations in many cultures. The media of popular culture is familiar and

the skills are found in the community. Experience has shown that people need more than information to make choices which are familiar and right for them. Information need to be placed in a context, which involves people in a personal way to enable them to experience a new idea, attitude, or a way of doing things and these values we can find in indigenous knowledge systems that are found in the traditions of the people Ghana and elsewhere. The Bomo Kalamkua festival of Nigeria and the Theatre for Development projects of Botswana and the Mau-Mau Movement of East Africa which used the peoples own culture in mobilizing community support for their freedom struggles cannot be ignored. The village drama or community drama an effective development promoting folk drama used by Mass Education teams in Ghana in the early fifties must be mentioned. Ansu Kyereme(1998).The Atwia Story-telling group of the people of Atwia Farming society in the Central Region of Ghana. I must also mention the rapid initiatives being undertaken by the University of Education, Department of Theatre Arts in the use of Popular Theatre to disseminate complex information to rural folks around the universities catchment areas using their own indigenous forms of knowledge. Many of the projects undertaken since 2009 have proved successful in changing their attitude and inducing behavioral change. Many organizations are appropriating this communication strategy in their programmes.

The advantages inherent in indigenous knowledge systems and traditional media have inspired numerous experiments in which scholars and development facilitators have attempted to encode development messages in such media especially, folk or indigenous drama and entertainment forms to induce attitude and behavioral change and thereby facilitating participatory and sustainable development in less privileged and rural communities bin Ghana.

Sustainable Participatory Development

For local participation in development to be sustainable, it requires the active involvement of people, the beneficiaries themselves in the design and implementation of activities intended to improve their welfare. Empowerment of the people to take increasing charge of their development is the key ingredient combined with a clear knowledge of environmental constraints and of requirements to meet basic needs.

It is therefore obvious that the concept of sustainability transcends the indispensable sustainability of a nation's natural resources. Development must be socially sustainable. It must increase people's control over their lives, maintain and strengthen community identity. In other words, sustainable development is something people must do for themselves. It is something that should done with people but not done for them.

It is thus safe to say that development is of the mind. It is a mental attitude and the mind remains the seat of it. It is not a static situation. It is dynamic; it is in a constant state of evolution. In the formulation of projects our thinking must be right and take into serious account the resources at hand and our own capabilities which when diligently and wisely applied to the resources will give us the expected satisfaction of the development manifestation at that time.

From the mind, development impulses are generated, they are formulated into projects which when executed show themselves as one or other manifestation of development. Media such as the folk arts especially theatre and other performing arts might be used to release the wealth of knowledge that exist in a community and in the process give the people an active part in development support. This approach requires the use of media at the local level so that the contents of programmes can be based primarily on real-life situations of people. Theatre in the context of development is an on-going process. It is not an end in itself, but a means in the development process. Popular Theatre for that matter uses participatory methods to arrive at its conclusion. It is a process that uses a methodology that is community based. This methodology includes research, sifting and prioritization planning storyline and scenario creation, rehearsals performance post-performance discussion, follow up and evaluation. Indeed by the late 1970s popular theatre for development was being used and described in several countries including Nigeria, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Cameroon as noted by (Epskamp and Desai, (1990). They advocate the use of this genre of communication because of its democratic potential. They view it as an alternative to the top-down modes of development communication in which the urban technocrats presume to know what is best for rural folks. The use of indigenous arts can promote active involvement, self reliance and participation in the development process.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to emphasize the value of cultural base to our very development thinking. I have shown that development springs from the mind and that the mind reflects the quality and relevance of the educational process through which it is passed. If the man possessing that mind is in tune with the environment, if he understands and appreciates it, if he is one with it, then his influences on it are bound to be salutary.

Efforts should be made to preserve the originality of our art-forms. Adaptation need not alter nor destroy the art-forms. The integrated and planned use of both folk and modern mass media is necessary for achieving maximum impact and for obtaining the desired feedback. Collaboration between the folk artistes and the modern mass

media producers is absolutely essential for the successful integration of folk media and modern mass media communication strategies for development process.

Many organizations, oppressed and downtrodden groups are rediscovering the potential of indigenous knowledge systems especially folk media and traditional popular performing arts as a weapon for their voices and plights to be heard. Other development planners in the Third World are beginning to appreciate the use of indigenous knowledge systems through which these organizations can explain their development programmes.

It is also a well known fact that any developmental programme which does not touch the vast masses of the people cannot be justified. The goals of rural economic growth in the narrow sense are to balance social and economic development, with emphasis on the equitable distribution as well as creation of benefits.

Government agencies, international organizations and donor agencies should delve deep into these available knowledge systems and progressively use this important and powerful tool as a means for mobilizing people for sustainable and holistic development.

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