

**THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMMUNICATION IN TRADITIONAL GHANAIAN
SOCIETY: THE LITERARY AND DRAMATIC EVIDENCE***

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In Africa to-day there is constant mobility between rural and urban centres. Rural dwellers are either attracted to the city in search of jobs or they are closely associated with the city in terms of trade and economic activities. However, the apparent control of economic and political decisions including structures that promote modernity by urban centres in Africa seems to create the impression that everything about urbanity constitutes the national standard. So rooted is this impression that it often comes as a source of mild surprise for city dwellers to learn from census figures that the bulk of national populations in Africa still continue to live in the rural areas.

In addition, while these urban dwellers have not been able to achieve homogeneity in their cultural patterns and responses, rural populations in Africa have continued to "owe their collective allegiance to the stabilised values and traditions embodied in the numerous festivals and dramatic occasions that are still part of African life to-day".¹ In effect, rural masses in Africa constitute authoritative sources of cultural continuity within national boundaries. Their continued link with the creative traditions of the African past places rural communities in a position to provide authoritative insights into problems that are intimately related to cultural expression. Consequently, any formulation of a comprehensive communication policy for an African country such as Ghana, ought to take into full account the rural dweller's concept and philosophy of communication. It is in this sense that this paper attempts a rationalisation of an African philosophy of communication from a rural perspective.

From our present state of knowledge, it now seems evident that traditional African societies established forms of communication largely through their domains of creativity. There are for example, distinctive forms of communication that result from creative verbal expressions such as poetry, prose narratives, songs and riddles. There are visual forms of communication that may include pottery, carving, weaving, decorative art and ornamentation while body movements, gestures and postures in dance and drama may also signify important modes of

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communicating significant emotions, ideas and concepts. Early researchers to Africa were fascinated by the way in which such formulations were believed to have led to a sustained communal ethos, in the sense that they provided the framework for inculcating homogenous ideas and values in traditional African society. The concept of communication which emerged from these researches consequently stressed the pragmatic functions of communication systems in African society (Herskovits, 1929; Clarke, 1934; Carrington, 1949; Armstrong, 1954; Agovi, 1980). However, with the recent emergence on the scene of African research scholars and their collaborators, there has been a tendency to emphasise such communication systems in traditional African societies as a creative phenomenon. Nketia's works in the area of African verbal traditions for example, have revealed a concern, among other considerations, with speech styles, speech surrogation and the creative inter-play of visual, sound and movement patterns in the total communication situation.² More recently, Ben Dan-Amos has suggested the view that folklore in Africa is a "communicative process" in which "creativity and aesthetic response ... converge in the forms themselves".³ Following from this, Richard Bauman has contended that the performance situation, particularly in African societies, constitute "a mode of language, a way of speaking" where aesthetic considerations are paramount.⁴

The shift from communication as a purely functional concept to one which emphasises it as an aesthetic and creative entity is clearly significant. While this new emphasis may be due to a better understanding of traditional African society through a more systematic research and scholarship, it also underlines a concept of communication that is perhaps truer to traditional African society than had hitherto been postulated. This concept of communication acknowledges the predominant role of traditional creative artists since they were regarded as the primary disseminators of communication in the society. Their central role in enhancing and co-ordinating communication events on state ceremonial occasions as well as on occasions of social, political and cultural significance made them the 'official communicators' par excellence. In addition, it was recognised that traditional creative artists had the singular ability to harmonise or fuse sensory perceptions together as a basis for establishing truth, beauty and relevance. Indeed, the use of the imagination to create an integrated perception of reality was considered a vital principle of the communication process. Hence a meaningful communication event in traditional African society was seen as the result of a total integration of visual, aural and verbal elements in the creation of the artist. Because traditional African society recognised the importance of integrating all the senses in the communication process, various

attitudes also existed towards each of them in their individual capacities, particularly in relation to each entity's ability to reveal wholesome truth or reality in the consciousness of man. The Ibibio of Cross River State, Nigeria, for example, say that the 'Ancestors die with their eyes and not with their ears'. The poet-cantors of the *Avudwene* in the Nzema Kundum festival, (in South-West Ghana) whose song texts, symbolically represent the wisdom of the ancestors, continually insist that the messages in their songs are always addressed to the human ear.⁵ Similarly, in Akan libation ceremonies, a favourite refrain is "tsie na atse!" (Listen so that you may hear well). On the other hand, the Yoruba of Nigeria express their fundamental distrust of the human eye in the story of Eshu and the two farmers. One day, says the story, Eshu painted one half of his body white and the other half black. Then he decided to walk up the road in between the two farmers at work. As each farmer saw his side of the god, he proclaimed that the god was all white or all black. A violent quarrel ensued as to the true identity of the god. Soon after, Eshu walked down the same path, this time revealing a different side to each of the farmers. Whereupon another violent quarrel followed, each farmer retracting his previous allegation or stand ...

In much the same way, the Akans of Ghana regard the mouth as a meta-physical force. When any Akan-Fante speaker says, "Ano a odzi nkyen na moko" - mouth that eats salt and pepper - he endows it with an image of mouth whose utterance possesses qualities of both the prophetic and the destructive. According to one writer, the significance of oratory, rhetoric, proverbial usage, riddling and poetic formulations among the Akan is based on the fact that it is the *anyansafo*, or traditional intellectuals, who are the originators of these forms of verbal communication.⁶ These *anyansafo* of the word, like all other creative artists, are respected and feared at the same time because their word can consolidate or destroy those who become their immediate targets.

Thus, while sight may not perceive the whole truth and the human mouth may be destructive, it is the sense of hearing alone that seems to have no apparent blemish. However, this is true only in the sense that it establishes the primacy of hearing in relation to sight and verbal elements. In practical terms, this is different. Although the human faculty of hearing is a primary factor in communication, it is not the only determinant of what constitutes essence in the communication process. For wholeness to be achieved in the communication process, there is always the need to integrate and harmonise these faculties in the performances of African creative artists. In several literary and dramatic performances, whether the primary medium is the spoken word, music, song, dance or enactment, related ideas and

sentiment may be evoked and dramatised through a deliberate ordering and fusion of visual, verbal, sound and movement effects.⁷

Equally relevant to our discussion is the fact that the target audience of the communication situation are reached when their collective memories are activated in a situation of emotional intimacy. A communication situation becomes meaningful and memorable for an audience when there is a direct appeal to their senses. Through a focus on the participant's ear and eyes, the intended communication is made to invade his total being, particularly in terms of his mind and feelings. In this way, both the communication process and its target audience share a common foundation in man's primary senses and perceptions. While the initiator of the process bases his imagination and skill on a harmony of the senses, integrating and ordering them into coherence, the beneficiaries receive it through what they see and hear. Thus from the point of view of African society, both the beginning and the end of the communication process ultimately depend on the senses for effect, meaning and relevance.

Because communication in these contexts is addressed to man's senses, it also has the tendency of being a highly personalised proposition. In other words, communication in traditional African society is not conceived as a mass consumption process. It is first and foremost always addressed to a collection of individuals in a given situation. Through these individuals, each receiving the experience in his own way, the aggregate society is eventually reached. This is why the concept of communication in traditional African society also permits the view of it as a phenomenon that seeks to bind people together on the basis of shared ideas, experiences and sentiment (Nketia, 1970: 71).

In this sense, traditional African society, to a large extent, confined itself to the development of intimate modes of communication. This was largely the result of the fact that traditional African society employed, almost exclusively, artists as its dominant 'state communicators'. Drummers, poets, cantors, carvers, dancers and singers became principal information functionaries, the sole agents of communicating the essence of the society to both the rulers and the ruled. Hence, by virtue of their highly personalised modes of presenting truth and reality, these creative artists were compelled to develop equally intimate ways of handling their information material and targets. Consequently, the dominance of artists in the communication process gave rise to the society's concept of it as a 'creative' medium. Invariably, this factor affected the degree of impersonality in the communication process, while at the same time it reflected on its ability to reach a cross section of the society at a given time.

We may thus offer the view that communication in traditional African society was a creative process in which there was a "progressive ordering and integration of man's senses and perceptions towards meaning and relevance".⁸ It directed its immediate appeal to the total man in terms of his mind and feelings, presenting him with a unique, individual experience. While it was not a means of mass mobilisation, it cultivated the individual as its primary focus. Communication also offered the individual in African society a mode of establishing truth and reality in the consciousness of the social man.

This philosophy of communication as a basis of truth and reality must necessarily have important implications for any communication policy in contemporary Africa. First, it means that policy makers have to identify a medium of communication that encompasses the audiovisual and addresses itself to man's ear and eyes simultaneously. Second, such a medium should forge an active partnership with creative and performing artists. Third, it should make the individual, rather than the corporate mass, the centre of its focus, and, finally, it should constitute for such an individual a mode of truth and relevance.

Following from this, it seems to me that of all the media of communication available to contemporary African society, the one that is most likely to meet the above criteria is television. While the cinema and the theatre may equally satisfy aspects of these same criteria, it is the television set alone that individuals or unit families can own in the comfort of their sitting rooms. In addition, although all the three media may share the potential of combining and making use of audio-visual effects, it is rather the television set which, inspite of its impersonality, can establish a relationship of intimacy with individuals in homes through the range and variety of its programmes. It is a medium that can create a decisive impression of focussing on the individual, appealing to the person's direct emotions and intellect simultaneously. In focussing on a collection of individuals in their separate homes, television also seeks to bind them together by means of shared ideas, sentiment and experience. In other words, television is the only medium that has the potential of effectively fulfilling the role of the artist in traditional African society as a 'state communicator', an intimate harbinger of truth and relevance and a disseminator of ideas and attitudes that may have individual as well as collective significance.

Already in Europe and America television has demonstrated a marked partnership with creative and performing artists in its attempt to fulfil its role as an entertainment medium. In Ghana and most parts of Africa, this partnership with artists and performers is yet to be realised fully. However, it is absolutely necessary that it be cultivated and consciously

nurtured. This is important, not necessarily for the same reason of entertainment, but for reasons of establishing credibility with its immediate audiences. Television in Africa has to acquire the respect and trust of its patrons in order to function effectively. It has to constitute itself, not as a medium for propaganda, but as a medium of truth and social relevance that the broad mass of our people, particularly those in the rural areas can easily identify with and accept. Finally, it has to concern itself with the projection of cultural essence in the society as the only way to win their confidence. In all these situations, an active alliance or association with creative artists and performing groups can bring to the medium the same ideals, attitudes and goals of communication in traditional African societies. Eventually, a common communication policy on the lines suggested above may be formulated to embrace film, theatre and television media in the country. It should also be art of the policy for African governments to ensure that television becomes a common household item particularly in the rural areas where its impact on the rural population will be as effective as their normal confrontations, in the context of performance, with their own creative and performing artists.

Communication that is solely addressed to the ear or the eye ranks next in importance. With particular reference to the eye, we need not be detained by reflections on the printed word. As far as traditional African society is concerned, this is a new addition to a way of life that has not fully come to terms with reading and writing. The printed word, although directed exclusively to the human eye, and through it, to the mind, is the hand maiden of a communication system that is radically different from our traditions of verbal expression which operate on principles of inter-media fusion. What this means is that given a philosophy of communication that is based on a fusion and a complementarity of the senses, the print media naturally recedes in importance on account of its apparent sterility. However, in the context of the ear, the radio becomes significant. It employs the framework of the spoken and sung word to make a direct appeal to the ear. Its operation focusses on the individual, first and foremost, as its unit of significance. Its ability to reach a collection of individuals over distances is remarkably similar to that of the drum. Moreover it dramatises a face-to-face communication situation that is familiar to audiences in traditional African society. It is therefore not a surprise that the popularity of the radio in Ghana is fairly well-established. It has been used to bridge the gap between rural and urban populations. It has been used to introduce new and useful ideas and attitudes that have individual and collective significance.

The role of radio as an information and educational medium, especially the establishment of a separate national radio station that recognises the autonomy of Ghanaian languages, constitutes correct policy directions. In addition, the current drive towards the establishment of local F.M. radio stations that cover reasonable distances within a given area is a most welcome development. While one language or a set of languages appropriate to an area may be selected as the medium of expression, the programmes so conceived should aim at changing attitudes and encouraging development initiatives that would raise the spirit of collective endeavours in each area. In addition, a definite cultural policy should also be evolved in which institutionalised forms of creative expressions may play a decisive role. Song, riddles, proverbs, tales and musical expressions indigenous to a given area as well as relevant ones from other areas of the same country may be given a pride of place. This will promote a re-examination of the intellectual basis of African traditions and also improve collective efforts at cultural self-definition as a people.

Our principal concern with radio and television in this paper therefore arises from their affirmation of an African communication system whose principles and modes of operation accord with those which guide these foreign communication symbols. What this means is that in the final analysis, we are dealing with a situation of change and adaptation in which two cultures and their representative symbols have to meet, converge and be merged. In this regard, it should be realised that the appropriate measures that ought to be taken have to be so carefully considered that ultimately, the integrity of African cultural symbols of communication may not be compromised in the process.

Notes

1. Kofi Agovi, 1984 "Cultural Presences in Japanese Theatre: An African's experience of Noh, Kabuki and Bunraku", in *The Japan Foundation Newsletter* Vol. XI, No.5. (Tokyo, Japan Foundation), p. 1-5.
2. See in particular Nketia's following articles:
 - 1964 "The Techniques of African Oral Literature" in *Proceedings of the Ghana Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 11 (Accra, Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences).
 - 1970 "Surrogate Languages of Africa" in *Current Trends in Linguistics* No.7 (The Hague Mouton).

- "The Linguistic Aspect of Style in African Languages" in **Current Trends in Linguistics No.7** (The Hague, Mouton).
3. Ben Dan-Amos 1975 "Towards a Definition of Folklore in Context" in **Toward New Perspectives in Folklore** (Austin, University of Texas Press) eds.: Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman.
4. Richard Bauman 1977 **Verbal Art as Performance**. (Massachusetts, Newbury House Publishers Inc.), p.4.
5. K.E. Agovi, 1979 **Kundum: Festival Drama Among the Ahanta-Mzema of South-West Ghana**. An unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Legon, Institute of African Studies, p. 256.
6. This concept of "Onyansafo/" is taken from an article by Kwame Gyekye, "Philosophical Relevance of Akan Proverbs" in **SECOND ORDER**, an African Journal of Philosophy, Vol. IV, No.2 (University of Ife Press, 1975), p.49.
7. This is extensively discussed in an earlier article by Kofi Ermeleh Agovi, "The Aesthetics of Creative Communication in African Performance Situations", **Research Review New Series** Vol.4, No.1, 1988. Institute of African Studies, Legon.
8. Kofi Ermeleh Agovi, "The Aesthetics of Creative Communication", **Research Review** Vol. 4, No.1, 1988.

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