

## ***Agricultural Communication and the African Non-Literate Farmer: The Nigerian Experience***

***E.O. Soola \****

### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines Nigeria's need for improved agricultural production and underscores the strategic importance of the country's rural economy. It profiles the Nigerian non-literate farmer, critically re-examines the concept of literacy and considers the factor of the orally literate in agricultural communication. Of the various factors responsible for poor agricultural production, the article concentrates on the need for effective dissemination of scientific agricultural information. It works at the communication needs of the non-literate farmer and appraises communication and information flow within this environment. It then identifies the various channels by which the rural farmer can be reached and influenced.

It submits on a final note that illiteracy in the Western sense does not preclude access to scientifically based agricultural information and adoption of improved agricultural practices.

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\* Dr. E.O. Soola is a Lecturer at the Language Arts Department of the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

## **La communication agricole et le paysan analphabète en Afrique: l'expérience du Nigeria**

### ***RESUME***

Cet article étudie le besoin pour le Nigeria d'améliorer sa production agricole et met en exergue l'importance stratégique de l'économie rurale. Il présente le paysan nigérian non-alphabétisé et procède à un examen critique du concept de l'alphabétisation; il analyse le facteur de la littérature orale dans le cadre de la communication agricole. Des divers facteurs qui sont à la base de la mauvaise production agricole, l'article se concentre sur la nécessité d'une dissémination effective de l'information scientifique agricole. Il analyse les besoins de communication du paysan non-alphabétisé et évalue la circulation de l'information et de la communication dans son environnement. Ensuite, il identifie les divers canaux par lesquels on peut atteindre et influencer le paysan. Enfin, il conclut que l'analphabétisme, au sens occidental, ne ferme pas l'accès à l'information agricole scientifique ni à l'adoption de pratiques agricoles améliorées.



## **Introduction**

Nigeria's need for improved agricultural production is increasingly becoming more crucial in the face of a steadily increasing population, a dwindling external reserve and a global uncertainty about the future of oil - the nation's major foreign exchange earner. Government's concern about this worsening situation is manifest in its orchestrated call for a return to the land. Even the industrial sector is currently faced with the uneasy choice between generating its agriculture-based raw material needs locally and grinding to a total halt.

## **The Strategic Role of Nigeria's Rural Economy**

Nigeria's rural economy is inseparably tied to the fortune, or misfortune of the Nigerian non-literate farmers who form the bulk of the rural populace. Apart for its nutritional resources which are vital for a healthy and productive citizenry, Nigeria's rural sector has a number of strategic roles to play in the nation's march towards national development. First, its produce can boost export earnings which in turn can be utilised for the importation of machinery and raw materials needed for industrialisation. Second, the rural sector itself constitutes a vast consumer market for industrial goods. Third, political independence becomes more meaningful only when backed by self-sufficiency in food production as a food-dependent nation is not only susceptible to international blackmail but can also easily have its sovereignty undermined. Fourth, in a nation with embarrassingly high unemployment statistics, an increasing number of school dropouts and a growing sense of job insecurity in both the private and public sectors, an improved rural economy can serve as a disincentive for rural-urban influx and its attendant evils of overcrowding, pollution and drift to criminality.

The above underscores the urgency of Nigeria's need for improved agricultural production. The country cannot afford the current slow pace of development in its agricultural sector if it is to avert economic and food crises of major dimensions in the immediate future.

The current level of productivity in the rural areas, measured against what scientific research has proved feasible manifests a classic example of a vast untapped potential of the rural sector (Mchombi 1981). No nation, particularly among the less developed countries (LDCs) where the majority of the population lives in the rural areas can confidently lay claim to a truly national development if its development is concentrated in urban areas.

Williams and Williams (1978) look back nostalgically at Nigeria's 'days of agricultural glory', when, between 1940 and 1960, exports of palm produce, cocoa and groundnuts doubled while cotton exports increased 300 percent and rubber, twenty fold. Also during this period, Nigeria emerged as the largest groundnut exporter in the world. In the same vein, (Famolriyo, 1985) has looked back to the pre-1960s when agriculture contributed about two-thirds of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). During that period, over 85 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings came from exports of agricultural produce. However, the situation has since changed for the worse with the sector accounting for a mere 5 percent of the country's total exports and 70 percent of its total non-oil exports (Famolriyo, 1983).

Of the various factors - cultural, economic, informational, managerial, technological, political - responsible for this worsening situation, we are concerned in this paper with information, a vital constituent without which the goal of improved agricultural production will painfully continue to be elusive. Wali (1981) underscores the importance of information when he observes that information, whether stored on paper or magnetic tape, or in the human mind, is a fundamental requisite for ensuring rationality and cohesion in decision-making. Lack of investment in information, Wali argues, results in the creation of an "information-poor" and "information-rich" society which tends to perpetrate and perpetuate the unequal distribution of gains in the development process. Mosher (1961) has also examined the positive influence of information on improved agricultural



development. He is of the view that scientific or technological information must be regarded as an essential ingredient for agricultural development. Williams and Williams (1978) have also noted that improved technology is to the farmer what food is to the human body - a life's sustenance - and argue that communication of improved technology is an important factor in the adoption of improved agricultural practices.

### **Who is the Nigerian Non-Literate Farmer?**

The Nigerian non-literate farmer lives in the rural areas where, incidentally, most Nigerians have their roots; he has access to about 80% of the total land resource and is responsible for over 95% of the nation's agricultural production (Oyaide, 1983). Unfortunately, like most other Nigerian rural dwellers, the Nigerian non-literate farmer is a marginalised citizen.

The Nigerian non-literate farmer is a small landowner or even a squatter. For long, this category of farmer has suffered a great deal of deprivation. Neglected by successive governments, researchers, extension agents, agricultural input suppliers, banks and other financial institutions; deprived of basic social amenities like drinkable water, electricity supply, hospitals and all-season motorable roads for transporting his produce to marketing centres, the Nigerian non-literate farmer is exploited by middlemen, produce merchants and opportunist city dwellers who take advantage of the farmer's bouts of surpluses and lack of preservatories to pay him ridiculously low prices for his produce.

The Nigerian non-literate farmer engages in subsistence farming, employs traditional methods and utilises traditional tools. He and his peers have been categorised as "partial economic men" because their duality in goal attainment (Williams and Williams, 1983) calls for farming as a means both of sustenance and cash income. He is thus considered not only as someone outside the country's monetary economy but also as a poor credit risk. The dual set goal and the farmer's small land holdings force him into mixed cropping which inevitably reduces his yields even when all necessary technological inputs have been added.

## **The Factor of Illiteracy**

The choice of the non-literate farmer as the focus of this paper is deliberate. It is borne out of this writer's perception that there is a small but growing nucleus of literate farmers, and if the on-going retrenchment exercise persists and the current campaign for a return to the land is heeded, the number of literate farmers is likely to increase appreciably soon. And while conceding that literate farmers, like their non-literate counterparts, require specialized, technological information, the literate farmers' search for and source utilisation may be enhanced by the factor of their literacy. Chole and Rahudkar (1978) concluded after their joint study on source-credibility pattern among small and big farmers in two Indian villages that literacy enhances source utilisation. However, since creating a literate citizenry is not only an expensive venture but also has to be a gradual process, and since the nation's agricultural needs cannot be delayed, the concept of illiteracy needs to be re-examined. Such a re-examination is done in this paper with a view to determining what constitutes illiteracy and whether illiteracy is necessarily inimical to adoption of agricultural innovation, or whether, in fact, the current apathy or even resistance to adoption is not, to a great extent, a factor of communication problem.

Conventionally, and by Western standards, the term illiteracy is understood to mean inability to read and write. This factor, scholars believe, restricts one's horizon in communication. Literacy, on the other hand, equips one with the ability to read and write. It also increases one's communication skills through the ability to communicate over wide distances in space and time (Aboyade, 1981). Okedara (1981) has also considered the factor of illiteracy in rural communities. The non-literate, in rural communities, according to him, belongs in a traditional society - a society whose structure is developed within limited production functions. Illiteracy, he has suggested, is a state which affects ways of thinking, levels of perception and consequently the ability to conceptualise things outside one's immediate environment.

The above view illustrates some of the epithets that have been bandied around about the rural non-literate. However,



the idea of literacy as the ability to read and write as is generally conceived in Western societies is now being challenged. Aboyade (1981) has argued that it is incorrect to classify people who keep alive the substance of their cultural history through oral methods as non-literate simply because they lack the knowledge of writing. She is of the view that a concept of literacy which perceives literacy and writing as one and the same thing ignores the factor of the orally literate.

In traditional societies, custodians of tradition such as 'Ifa' priests are men who are committed to a life-long rigorous mental training by which the whole corpus gets committed into memory and can be recited at a moment's notice. Also, traditional healers - men and women - commit into memory a repertoire of medicinal preparations for various ailments and diseases. They learn by heart thousands of ingredients that go into the making of such preparations and can readily retrieve from their 'data bank' not only the finer details of the ingredients but also the intricately worded incantation that go with some of the preparations. Thus, traditional societies abound with men and women of considerable learning, wisdom and understanding. Such men and women cannot be written off as non-literate.

The non-homogeneity (Lawani, 1981) of the rural community must also be appreciated. While most are farmers, others belong in other professions or occupations. Among the non-literate farmers, some are tradition-bound, others are progressive. And while some are indifferent even to the goings-on around them, others are information-conscious.

What this new concept of literacy seems to suggest is that development communication among the so-called tradition-bound, illiterate farmers may not be an impossible task after all. Perhaps what is required of the communicator is to appreciate and understand the non-literate farmer's culture, existing traditional farming practices, his felt needs and other factors that condition his decisions and actions. This characterization is crucial for successful communication with the non-literate farmer. The communicator will also need to avail himself of the rich traditional channels of communication to reach the non-literate farmer. The communicator's gospel of scientific agricultural information and the innovation it offers are likely to be ignored or resisted if the communicator is culturally distant and urban-oriented, and if the technological inputs he is recommending are not

within the physical and financial reach of the non-literate farmer.

### **Communication Needs of the Non-Literate Farmer**

The communication needs of the non-literate farmer is as vast as it is varied. It spans the whole spectrum of the farmer's activities, from production to marketing. According to Russell (1981), the range is a rather daunting one with biological, economic, political and sociological facets. To Mbithi (1973) and Mchombi (1981) the range of the farmer's information need is wide. Williams (1978) has observed that since modernizing agriculture is almost as complex as the scientific world itself, the farmer's information needs are indeed diverse and complex. Lawani (1981) is of the view that agriculture is a complex industry and that the system of production, transport, storage, marketing and processing for food and fibre requires a large variety of pieces of information.

The farmer's information needs thus cover a wide variety of the farmer's activities. His information requirements must span such areas as climate, soil, traditional planting and tending practices. Other areas of his information needs are availability of requisites such as improved seeds, fertilizer, farm implements and pest control. The rural non-literate farmer also needs to be informed in the areas of harvesting, storage, transportation and marketing facilities and the attendant problems peculiar to his immediate environment. Yet other areas of his information requirements are fishing practices, live-stock production and preservation as well as exploitation and conservation of forest resources. Above all, the non-literate farmer requires latest information on research findings in the various areas of his farming activities.

### **Disseminating Agricultural Information**

There is very little doubt about the availability in Nigeria today of a wealth of scientifically-based information for improved agricultural production. Universities, research institutes and schools of agriculture have developed high yielding, quick maturing and pest resistant varieties. They



also can determine, perhaps to the minutest detail, other technological inputs necessary for maximum yield from each crop variety. However, there appears to be something defective in the method of disseminating this information, hence the current low patronage of recommended improved agricultural practices.

Communicating with the non-literate farmer must be predicated on a thorough appraisal of the information environment and the information needs of the rural non-literate farmer. Determining the farmer's information needs must be a shared responsibility between the farmer himself and the communicator or extension agent. While the extension agent or communicator acts as the purveyor of specialized, technological information for improved agricultural production, the farmer should be entrusted with the responsibility of feeding the researcher through the communicator or extension agent with information on his problems, successes and failures in his day-to-day farming activities. Since he is in a vantage position to assess and compare his traditional and modern farming practices as well as his output from each, he is no doubt a better informer in these aspects. What we are suggesting here, therefore, is that the task of determining the information needs of the rural non-literate farmer and consequent information content of our communication should not be seen as our responsibility alone. The communication flow must be multi-directional. Feeling the pulse of the non-literate farmer for his information needs may serve as a potent force for breaking down his resistance to adoption.

An appreciation of the media environment of the rural non-literate farmer and information flow within that environment is thus vital not only meaningful communication with him but also for getting him to adopt the new practices being recommended. The rural community is rich in traditional channels of communication if only the communicator is enterprising enough to want to exploit the rich communication resources of this environment.

Omu (1978) categorizes the agencies for communicating information in traditional Nigerian society into two groups - the oral communication or information transference media, and the formal transference media. However, for the purpose of this paper, we are interested in Omu's informal

transference media which include family visiting, marriage and circumcision feasts, town and village festivals, public trials, quarrels, and disputes. Imrana Yazidu (1973) in his "Study of Radio as a means of Communicating Agricultural Information to farmers in Northern States of Nigeria", also identifies traditional meetings such as wedding, naming and funeral ceremonies, harvest, markets and visiting as potent channels of communicating with the preponderantly illiterate farmers of northern Nigeria.

Basu (1969), in a study of the "Relationship of Farmers Characteristics to the Adoption of Recommended Farm Practices in four villages of the Western State of Nigeria -Tede, Irawo, Offiki, Ago-Amodu: argues that the introduction of new farming ideas is a type of technological change whose adoption is highly influenced by the social and cultural conditions of rural life. He identifies, among others, visiting friends and participation in formal village organizations as sources of communication among rural farmers. In the same vein, (Aboyade, 1981) has identified town-criers, talking drums, market places, village squares, schools, churches and mosques as avenues for information dissemination in rural communities. Also, Sobowale and Sogbanmu (1984) have acknowledged the strong influence of friends and relations in innovation adoption among rural fishermen in Lagos, State, Nigeria, particularly after initial awareness had been created by the mass media.

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, some traditional festivals and ceremonies can be instructive in that they signal the times of planting or harvesting crops and may even give hints on how the crops are to be tended. Aboyade cites the example of 'Ifa' corpus from which a lot of information about the characteristics of various plants, animals, birds and other living and non-living things can be derived. Quoting Wande Abimbola, she describes the conditions favourable to the growth of the cotton plant as affirmed in some verses of the 'Ifa' corpus as "gentle rainfall in the early stages of its growth, plenty of dewdrops when it is forming its seeds, and sunny weather when its buds are opening up as cotton wool". Also, the New Yam Festival (Achebe, 1971) among the Igbo of Nigeria signifies that yams are ripe for harvesting.

During these festivals and ceremonies, people of all age groups from far and near, community leaders, chiefs, priests



and other acknowledged leaders of the people mingle freely to share the unique experience each festival brings. Such moments offer ample opportunities for exchange of agricultural information as people discuss freely their social and occupational problems, failures and successes in an atmosphere, which makes them more receptive to communication that touches on the welfare of the community.

### **Agricultural Communication and the Extension Agent**

The extension worker is a change agent, a liaison officer uniquely placed in the intricate network of agricultural communication; he is the 'go-between', serving to link what (Russell, 1981) calls the research network and the farmer network. Iniodu (1985) defines the role of the extension agent as one of extending knowledge from formal agricultural education institutions to farming communities; of carrying new technologies developed by agricultural scientists to farmers in the field and of relating back to the scientists those field problems that require further investigations and additional information. The extension personnel, Iniodu argues, must understand the philosophy of his service which embodies the development of the farms themselves to the extent that they can adequately identify their problems, design their own plans of action, make their own decisions and carry out their plans according to the research results and modern technology information disseminated to them by the extension field staff.

The extension agent's task is a rather arduous one, and so, for success, he need not only be able to understand and interpret scientific or technological agricultural information but he also needs to be a skilled communicator, able to establish personal relationships with both the farmer and the researcher. Empathy with the farmer is crucial if the extension agent is not only to inform but also to effect attitude change in the farmer.

The extension agent needs to be able to assemble, collate and synthesize information from diverse research sources and the farmer's field results as well as disseminate the information by establishing a two-way communication channel so that there is a steady flow of scientifically-based

agricultural information from researchers through him to the farmer while he conveys back to the researcher the farmer's success stories and queries on the recommended farm practices. To effect adoption, which is his ultimate goal, the extension agent may need to seek, influence and utilize opinion leaders within the community.

### **The Role of Opinion Leaders**

Occasionally, because of the heterophilous characteristic of the change agent, he might need to employ the services of opinion leaders as intermediaries to reach and positively influence the rural non-literate farmer. Opinion leaders are those to whom others turn for advice. In Nigerian rural communities, they are the 'Sarking Norma', the 'Baale', leaders of thought, teachers, priests, chiefs, and other community leaders whose views are respected. Such people should be persuaded to adopt the new practices as their example is likely to serve as a catalyst for attitude change and adoption of new practices.

### **Mass Media and Agricultural Communication with the Non-Literate Farmer**

Agricultural extension service in Nigeria, and indeed in most developing countries, not only suffers from lack of adequately qualified agricultural extension personnel but it is also terribly ill-equipped to meet the challenges of its operations. This factor has forced most governments in the less developed countries to turn to the mass media to do the trick of reaching thousands or even millions of farmers in a swoop. The mass media generally have been acclaimed the world over as a great multiplier of ideas (Schramm, 1964). The transistorized radio, particularly because of its relative cheapness and ubiquity has been seen as the best means of reaching a far-flung (Moemeka, 1981) illiterate population since radio transcends the barrier of illiteracy. However, research findings on diffusion of innovation (Berelson and McPhee, 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers and Svenning, 1969; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Sobowale and Sogbanmu, 1984) have shown that while the mass media are good in creating initial awareness, they are poor in influencing people



for attitude change. Thus, McCroskey et al (1971) have argued that if we wish to influence large numbers of people, we must be able to influence the interpersonal communication in which they are involved.

Radio as a popular medium among rural people should therefore be used in creating initial awareness as well as in feeding information into discussion forums. This active farmer-involvement is crucial for success in the Nigerian situation where, as (Nwuneli, 1984) has observed, the rural radio audience is still largely an eavesdropping audience and where the mass media suffer from urban-centrality syndrome (Soola, 1984). What we are suggesting therefore are well organized, well co-ordinated 'radio rural forums' or 'radio farm forums' which have been tried with varying degrees of success in Canada, Colombia, Ghana, India, Senegal etc. This system provides a two-way communication an exchange process which is imperative for adoption of innovations.

### **The Role of the Library**

The library is increasingly coming into focus as a potent source of information for the rural non-literate farmer. However, because the librarian is here dealing with a preponderantly illiterate population, he needs to adopt an unorthodox method of acquiring, organizing and disseminating his information. The documentalist, working in concert with the extension agent, can collate, interpret, repackage and document scientific and technological agricultural information relevant to the needs of particular communities. The documentation may profile the rural milieu, its history, social life and traditional festivals. The rural non-literate farmer must be an active participant in this process, relating his experiences, problems and asking questions on his day-to-day activities as well as on how to improve the harsh conditions of daily living. The information so jointly gathered can be illustrated in pictorial pamphlets, posters or stored in audio cassettes for playback when and where necessary.

### **Audio Tapes**

Audio tapes constitute an invaluable asset in communicating agricultural information to the non-literate

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