A Proposal for New Communication Research Methodologies in Africa

by Isaac Obeng-Quaidoo*

Abstract

This article looks at mass communication research in the African cultural and traditional context and suggests some innovative approaches that would enhance local communication research endeavours.. It examines how African peoples, cultures, institutions and communication environments impede or facilitate social research. The author calls for indigenous efforts in the construction of new theories and methodologies in communication research that would appropriately fit the African context of development.

Re'sume'

L'article examine la recherche en communication de masse dans le contexte de la culture et des traditions africaines pour ensuite suggérer quelques nouvelles approches en vue d'encourager les efforts des chercheurs locaux.

Il observe comment les peuples africains, leur cultures, institutions et environnement en matière de communication entrave ou facilite la recherche sociale.

L'auteur lance un appel en faveur d'efforts authoctone en vue de l'élaboration de nouvelles théories et méthodologies de recherche en communication qui pourraient être plus adaptées au contexte africain du développement.

* Isaac Obeng-Quaidoo is a Lecturer, School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.

Introduction

The past two decades and half have witnessed communication seminars, workshops, and symposia[1] in various countries on the African continent. Some of these gatherings have tended to be international in outlook, but others have been confinded to the local issues. At least some of the reports of these seminars try to indicate certain limitations of the Western social research methods when used in the rural areas of Africa. It has been indeed a worthwhile exercise to establish the limited usefulness of the methods which most African communication educators, critics, and commentators have imbibed from the developed countries.

One observer of the research scene, Mowlana, has noted[2] that after the doctorate degree in Mass Communication from the developed countries, it takes a person from the developing country about six years to divest himself/herself of the concepts and models which he/she has learnt in the developed countries and which are at times not workable in his/her own country. This divestation takes a while because, during his/her student days, the person did not only learn the mechanics of constructing a questionnaire, interviewing, handling computer cards, or differentiating raw data from interpretation, but he/she also learnt the the culture that accompanied such academic pursuits. Since cultural learning and unlearning is much slower and more gradual than mechanical education, it takes a long while for a person to step back and re-examine his/her thinking and culture.

This paper takes a look at the African mass communication research context; the problems we seem to gloss over as if they do not exist. It then introduces certain approaches which might enhance our research endeavours.

The fundamental aim is to raise questions for consideration. Again, the approach here is that instead of adding to the litany of the unsuitability of western models, we rather look at ourselves, our culture, our institutions, and the African communication environment, and how all these impede or facilitate research.

The Role of Culture in Formulating Methodologies

A discussion of communication research in rural Africa entails essentially the use of scientific knowledge for the systematic application of modern and traditional communication to aid and enhance the processual change in the social, economic, political and cultural milieu of ruralites. Culture, as used above, is generic to all the other three concepts, and these

three concepts can be subsets of culture. For instance, we can safely talk about an economic culture or political culture of a country and each time culture would be salient because *culture* "serves as a screen or filter through which new technology, methods, and ideas are introduced *(or evolved in)* into society," (Ketudat, 1983: 127-133).[3] Not long ago, there was a great deal of talk about transfer of technology to the developing countries. But what the technological enthusiasts forgot was that, whereas it is well recognised that science is universal and transferable, the methodologies and technologies for obtaining scientific knowledge are not universal. Again, these are screened by the prevailing culture, and the relationship between cultural heritage and modernization, according to Ketudat, "poses the question of how far it is necessary to make adjustments in the cultural tradition in order to accommodate new technology and innovations or vice versa."

Thus, any discussion of methodological innovations without considerations for the underlying cultural imperatives is like a captive mouse gyrating forever. As we shall delineate later, certain cultural values can be modified to suit certain innovations, but, relying on the work by Smoliez (1981)[4], Ketudat again emphasizes that every culture has a core value with a "boundary beyond which one cannot adjust or change without detrimental effect on that culture." The core value of different cultures may be different. For example, the core value of the Greeks and French is their languages. That of the Chinese is their family and clan. The Jewish core value is their religion.

For the African culture(s) which is (are) not mentioned in Smoliez and Ketudat's analyses, African communication methodologies would have to delve into the disparate anthropological, sociological, psychological, religious, political, historical, writings about Africans in order to deduce some meaning and understanding of African core value. Where lies the core value boundary of African culture? And for those of us who want to pontificate about the suitability or otherwise of certain methodologies for the African rural areas, it behoves us to analytically explicate the core value boundary of African culture(s). It is only then can we see the filter through which most of our research methodologies would pass for a better understanding of African society and meaningful development.

The Likely Core Value Boundaries of African Culture

The heading for this section of the paper brings home to the reader that we do not have clear cut answers to the questions we are raising. As usual,

we want African communication researchers to look at their societies, because the methodologies come from the societies, not outside.

Everything we are going to say below is by no means new, but we have not seen anyone who has tried to examine them in the context of communication research methodology development in the African context. It is an attempt and critiques are needed for continuous improvement and elaboration. We have identified four key areas which, to us, come closer to the core value boundaries of African culture. These are:

(1) the role of the supreme God/Allah and lesser gods in the daily life of the African;

(2) the African concept of time and its influence on him/her;

(3) the African's concept of work and its relationship to how he/she perceives his/her own relationship to nature;

(4) the non-individuality of the African and how this affects his/her world view. After discussing all these core value boundaries, we then explicate the implications for communication research and methodological development in the African context. Let us first look at God and lesser gods.

The African's worldview evolves around one Supreme God, or Allah but below this God or Allah are the *lesser gods who listen to people's prayers* and supplications, and at times dish out reward or punishment to people according to their deeds. The Supreme God or Allah, according to the African, seems to be far away, slow and does not manifest Himself frequently at our level of existence, and so the African (both the traditional and the sophisticated) consult the representatives (priests, juju men) of the lesser gods for rapid results in their daily affairs: for examination, success in farming, promotion on the job, travelling, for money, choice of a partner, and even the killing of another person.

One further question we need to ask in this regard is whether the spiritual churches in Africa are taking over the work of the animistic traditional and christian churches or re-emphasizing the work of fetish priests and local shrines. We have to be clear in our minds, as researchers, whether this idea of Supreme God and lesser gods exercises a profound influence on the thought, imagination and day-to-day activities of the African. Do people always run back to the gods for solution to any problems, and why?

Another likely core boundary of African culture is the concept of *time*. Time, in the traditional African thought, is a symbol for *events*. The linear concept of time in Western thought (with an indefinite past, present, and infinite future) is practically foreign to African thinking. The future is absent because time and events which lie in it have not taken place, and, therefore, cannot constitute time. Mbiti (1971: p. 17)[5] defines African time as 'A composition of events which have occured, those which are taking place

now and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurence falls in the category of 'no-time.' What is certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena, is in the category of inevitable or *potential time.*"

In this case, according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present*, and virtually *no future*. And since what people do is motivated by what they believe, and people's belief systems have some organization in terms of time perspective; either they are deeply rooted in terms of the historical past, present, or future or not at all. According to Rokeach (1970: p118)"A time perspective may be broad or narrow. An attitude may have a narrow time perspective in the sense that the beliefs comprising it are oriented primarily in terms of the historical past, or present, or future".[6] For example, a closer look at the African shows that he/she has many myths explaining the past, but there are no myths explaining the future or end of the world, since time has no end.

This time concept also subsumes the African concept of reincarnation (which is different from the philosophical considerations of the East). Death, for the African, means the death of the physical body, but the real essence of the human being lives on and would be born again into the same family or clan. Added to this is the view that the African never accepts death as a natural phenomenon. There is always a reason for death; whether it comes to the youth or the aged, and this explains our pre-occupation with necromancy and visits to the priests and shrines to find out *why* someone is dead.

The African may not have full commitment to industrial work since he/she is not seen to respond to firing, layoffs, or unsatisfactory work conditions by returning to the village farm. He/She has in mind that industrial wage is for subsistence living: actual money can be obtained from farming.

We observe that, unlike the western industrial man cultured in the Protestant ethic, and who considers industrial work as a duty connected with one's eternal reward, the African considers work as a necessity for survival, not a duty. Fortunately or unfortunately (depending on how one views this situation) this epitomises the African's relationship to nature. Nature is not something to be subdued or conquered, but a manifestation to be co-operated with. And this, indeed, explains our elaborate sacrifices and prayers when we want to cut down a big tree, build on a spot, or start a project on land or water.

The non-individuality of the African. Apart from the celebrated *extended family system* which encompasses everyone within the immediate clan, people from a similar village tend to regard each other as brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, nephews, godfathers, unless there is a

conflict or friction among families in the village. This explains why the caring for the aged, the destitute, the handicapped members of the group is the duty of all well-to-do and able bodied members of the extended family.

The four core value boundaries we have outlined above by no means exhaust all the critical core values that may exist. We have not even discussed why some families keep on producing children until they have a male heir as a sign of their own personal immortality. What we have not done in this paper is to explicitly tell the reader whether such and such core value boundary is functional or dysfunctional for the developmental or the modernization process in Africa, and the possible positive or negative consequences for the communication research methodological innovations.

Application of Some Research Methodologies to the Core Value Boundaries

What we prefer to do is to let the core value boundaries that we have identified be what they are, and then look at how certain African contextual research methodologies can fit them. Since a search of some of the literature did not produce any studies, can research methods on the African continent rely on our own accumulated field of experiences?

Let us take the non-individuality of the African as a core value boundary and see how certain methodologies can be explicated to fit. A closer look at most of the communications studies done in the rural areas have involved survey methods and case studies. This has mostly meant the interviewing of individuals, and then the aggregation of individual responses to achieve a composite whole. There is nothing wrong with survey research if only we recognise its limitations, but in the African context it would be worthwhile to interview people in groups.

So far the ideal situation has been to train the interviewer to interview separately two adults in each household; preferably a male and a female. But field experience has taught us that frequently it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw one member of the family aside and interview him/her. We find that a whole troop of youngsters and even other adults would like to listen to the kind of questions the interviewer is going to ask one member of the family. Persistent persuasion that the interview is for only one member of the family sometimes falls on deaf ears, and the interviewer is quite helpless to drive away the unwelcome crowd. This situation is especially common in compound houses in the villages.

We know that when a second, a third, or numerous people surround an individual during an interview, the individual's "true" responses change to

the socially acceptable ones, and invariably this reduces validity and reliability. In some cases, even some members of the unwelcome crowd try to correct the interviewee if they feel that the response he/she has given is not convincing or appropriate to them.

In order to resolve this problem, we need to have *group interviews* in both the rural and urban areas of Africa. Let us bear in mind though that group interviews have their own unique limitations in the African context. Depending on the topic for interview, (family planning information, diffusion of innovation, indiscipline in society, desirability or otherwise of military rule, uses of radio, television and video, diffusion of information), the interviewees may disagree and alternations may result whereby the interviewer may have to spend most of the interview time being an umpire. However, for a well-trained skilful interviewer this would be the ideal time to collect significant data. People at times tell the truth when they are involved in heated argument.

In the African context too, researchers can experiment with interviewing family groups. We should bear in mind that children and young adults are not supposed to talk when older people are talking, unless they are invited to participate in the interview. Due to the male dominance in most African socieites, wives at times want their husbands to answer all questions, even those relating to contraceptives and family planning (Obeng-Quaidoo, 1979).[7]

We can also interview the whole compound, not just one family in the compound. But such an approach brings its own attendant problems. Although members of one compound tend to be homogeneous in terms of consanguinity and ethnic affiliation, experience has shown that different family members in the same compound are at times heterogeneous with regard to SES variables (even if we use farm size, home ownership, number of wives and ability to care for children at school, number of cows, or motorability and brand of car).

Let us look at the implications for research of the other African core value boundaries: work as a necessity for survial, not as the Protestant ethic would consider it as a duty. To my mind, the idea of *work as a necessity for survival* has implications for the development of African communication theory which would, in the long run, guide research. As we indicated above, research without any philosophical or theoretical base tends to be very sterile. In the beginning, communication research in the United States was based on the manipulative and propaganda considerations in order to aid the War efforts. Much emphasis was and still is put on how the communication affects or influences the receiver. On the other hand, if we recall the traditional African's attitude to nature, we realise that his/her

communicative behaviour is not to manipulate or influence another, but in reality to co-operate and share information or ideas, or meaning.

If research verifies what we have outlined above to be valid, then our research methodology in the African context would be to find out how far the communicator understands the audience, instead of asking how the audience understands what is communicated. The focal concept here should be *meaning sharing.* By meaning, I do not point to just the understanding of a particular language, or understanding of the message. For example, if an African broadcaster tells his/her audience that using contraceptives (pills, IUD, condom, etc.) reduces over-population, this would be understood by almost all audience members, but for a majority of his audience, the communicator might not have shared meaning. For, the question of having one, three, five, or seven children is an ontological one, and to communicate meaningfully the communicator must share the views of inheritance, survival after death, individual actualization and immortality through the male child, and the positivity and blessings that society attaches to fecundity. This kind of meaning sharing helps the member of that audience to be aware of him/herself and his/her relationship to the overall issue of over population.

With regard to core value boundary of time, the implications for research appear to be numerous. If we divide the concept (time) into two broad categories:

(1)   time as events, and

(2)   time as a transcendental phenomenon, we find that what we do in the field of research need modification. If time is cyclical and it means events, then as researchers,,we should approach the rural people as if they know their own problems. Events can be problematic, but let them tell you that. As researchers, we should not impose our "falsely" perceived problems on them.

Field experience has shown that while we interviewers are in most cases in a hurry to finish one interview and move to another in order to complete the cases alloted to us, most interviewees are relaxed and ready to share their water, food and engage us in certain conversations which are "irrelevant" (according to our definition of the situation). But for the ruralite, the interview situation is an event, something is happening. "Why the hurry? If the interview is not completed today, it can be continued some other time." The interviewee seems to be asking and answering the interviewer. With the cyclical nature of time, there is no need to be anxious, and overly worried about unfinished tasks. One would always come back and complete them.

Time as transcendental phenomenon implies that, for the African, the cause of events at times lies outside his/her influence. At our level of

existence, not every phenomenon or event is explicable. This means that in the research situation if an interviewee provides "don't know" answer because the situation is the will of God or the gods, we should not force any alternative responses on them. The answer they willingly give is part of their world view.

If we combine the core value boundary view of God/Allah and the lesser gods with time as part of the African transcendentalism, can we argue then that spiritual motive dominates the African's life? If an individual believes that this existence is just temporary and that the real life is somewhere in the heavens, one's general behaviour is bound to be different from someone who does not have such beliefs.

If African researchers consider the outline above as something theoretically worth pursuing, then the starting point would be to discover the African's *mode of intrapersonal communication* with these "other-worldly" phenomena which invariably influence the Africa's existence. A broad outline of an African theory in this area would facilitate the emergence of certain useful methodologies. For instance, it might likely be that in future, we shall not arm ourselves with prepared questionnaires for the villages. Rather, we shall live in the villages as participant observers, partake in the activities of the shrines, talk to juju men, attend the spiritual churches, the established christian churches, before we engage villagers in a free open-ended discussions of their spiritual activities vis-a-vis the physical realities of their surroundings. Such an approach will help us find the intuitive communicative behaviour of the African.

Summary and Conclusion

Our education in the developed countries arms us with certain necessary logical tools for arriving at certain scientific explanations, but we return to our developing countries and gradually realize that the logic and rationality we tend to bring to every situation are not shared by other members of our society. We go in circles with our educated methodologies until we stop to askourselves:Why haven't the rural people changed? It is only then that we begin to think of new theories and methodologies which would fit the African context.

It would be unfortunate if an impression has been given in the paper that survey research and participant observation are the only methodologies we should modify for the African context. We should, by all means, continue using our content analysis. But, let us forget the content analysis of the African newspapers (to find out whether they report developmental news) for a while (a sort of benign neglect), and as

97

researchers, move to other areas. For instance, we can turn to the accumulated judicial records and examine how certain cases have been decided in favour of some of our core value boundaries because the boundaries were threatened. Such an exercise will, in the long run, help us to understand why our journalists write the way they want to in our papers.

REFERENCES

1. (a) There was one with the theme: *Motivation, Communication and Information for Development Purposes in Africa and Asian Countries*, Ibadan, 1st - 9th July 1974.

   (b) *Seminar on Development Support Communication Strategies.* Freetown, 18th - 22nd August, 1975.

   (c) *Communication and Rural Development* Accra, 30th November - 3rd December 1981.

   (d) We are also aware of similar seminars in Nairobi, Arusha, and in 1983, in Lagos and Buea, Cameroon

2. Personal conversation with Professor Hamid Mowlana during a communication seminar in Lagos in July 1983.

3. Ketudat, Sippanondha (1983) "The Roles of Culture and Scientific Co-operation" in *UNIVERSITAS: A Quarterly German Review of the Arts and Sciences.* Vol. 25, No. 2. pp. 127-133.

4. Smoliez, J.J. (1981) "Cultural Values and Scientific Development" in *Cultural Heritage VS. Technological Development* (ed.) by R.E. Vente, R.S. Bhathal, R.M. Nakhoode. Maruzen Asia.

5. Mbiti, J. (1971) *African Religions and Philosophy.* New York: Praeger Publishers.

6. Rokeach, M. (1970), *Belief, Attitudes, and Values,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

7. Obeng-Quaidoo, I. (1979) "Cultural Differences Affecting the Introduction of Birth Control Information in Africa: the case of Ghana." A Paper Presented at a Seminar on Family Planning in Accra.