

## THE RELEVANCE OF THE FOLK MEDIA AS CHANNELS IN PROMOTING AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES

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**Abstract:** *Africans are noted for their rich cultural heritage which has been preserved from generations. However, the influx of foreign cultural materials into Africa has brought about an erosion of the rich African cultural values. Given the important role of oral tradition in the indigenous African setting, there is need to look inward in order to reinvent the folk media as approaches in promoting African cultural values. Folk media have been identified as an important vehicle of social change, in the light of their educational and entertainment functions. Folk media have had remarkable impact on most rural societies because of the acceptable idioms, functional significance and the cultural values they convey. Folk media can overcome the difficulties of language, speech, words and other barriers of communication. Traditional African value systems teach and promote hard work, honesty, loyalty, courage and accomplishments. These values are adequately embedded in those folk media and they are the conduit of their transmission and preservation. The position of this paper therefore is that there should be a reorientation in using folk media channels for promoting African cultural values.*

**Keywords:** Folk media, African cultural values, value systems, oral tradition

## INTRODUCTION

Every human society has developed its indigenous and traditional modes and channels of communication which characterize its existence, organization and development. These communication modes and channels form the basis upon which the rural communities are desirous to effect African values. Unfortunately, the cultural fabrics of most African countries have suffered a seemingly irreparable damage in the face of globalization.

The operations of the mass media are patterned on the western model. According to Okunna(1999) these mass media and the New Media - radio, television, computer, newspaper, magazines, books, bill-boards, cinema, recordings, Internets etc, have all by content and production eroded the cultural values of Africans through the influx of dominant cultures which have continued to affect the sensual gratification of the modern mind. McBride *et al* (1981), commenting on this situation maintain that proliferation in the communication industry over the decades has brought millions of people who were previously living in isolated communities to the external worlds through conventional communication channels. This situation have generated two major concerns: one, the development of mediated communication is a technical and social need, but may also be a threat to the quality and values of culture; two, the indiscriminate opening of doors to new experiences and impressions by the media sometimes alienates people from their own culture.

Culture is very fundamental in the way people live their lives and it is often transmitted through oral tradition. Their appeals have historically been both functional and aesthetic. They have always served to entertain, educate, to reinforce existing ideas or ideologies or to change existing values and attitudes. Reinforcing this point, Ugboajah (1985) posits that:

Traditional media as entertainments can attract and hold the interest of large numbers of people. As oral media in local languages, they can involve the poorest groups and classes. As dramatic representations of local problems, they can provide a codification of reality which can be used by participants to analyze their situation. And, as collective expressions and communal activities, they create the contexts for cooperative rather than individual thinking and action and the possibility for peer learning

This is the essence of any form of communication. Communication is believed to be the life stream of every society. A society is defined as a group of people who have lived together long enough to evolve common norms and values. Culture distinguishes one society from another as it gives form and meaning to a people's existence. Culture has to do with the way a people behave, their values, attitudes and shared ideas. It is one of the main determinants of whether a society develops rapidly or slowly and it is

embedded in the way of life of a people transmitted from generation to generation either through written form or words of mouth.

Traditional communication variously described as folk media, oramedia, or indigenous media (Jenkins 1992) which are regarded as intangible artefact of a culture, made up of customs, traditions, stories, songs, religion, performance arts and superstition has great relevance within African culture. It is a conduit for promoting cultural values as Ugboajah (1985) rightly maintains that Oramedia are the prime disseminators of culture. Folk media as one of the products of the culture of the society form a part of the society that people belong to. People live and die with their folk media. They are easy to decode and understand by the common masses because of their nature and origin. Folk media are most effective in promoting African ideals and values to the upcoming generation.

Values are learnt by going through experiences which stimulate emotional responses, thereby affecting the core of the personality. Many intrinsic values distinguish the life of the African and in characteristic ways determine also his modes of being-in-the-world. However, in the wake of urbanization, industrialization, science and technology and globalization in many areas of human endeavours, Africa is facing a major crisis of losing her traditional values and relegating her peculiar life styles for foreign ones. Some traditional African values have suffered disruption, reversal or even extinction. Maintaining and promoting African rich cultural values is critical especially at a time when technology is pervading the society in all ramifications.

The culture and tradition bequeathed to the younger generation by their ancestors needs to be preserved and protected from some of the negative and indiscriminate forces of modernisation, in order to enable them to retain their identity and dignity in a world characterised by the speed and impact of the modern media. Though some aspects of the African cultural system are already displaced by Western incursion into Africa through the mass media; a factor partly responsible for our current malaise, folk media can still be effectively used for promoting African cultural values. Folk media have a role in the communication and promotion of new ideas and the adjustment to a new social or political order, apart from its traditional role of preserving and teaching established values.

The position of this paper is that folk media provide viable tools for promoting African values in the face of the erosion of most African values by foreign media content. This is because folk media is adaptable to the indigenous sensibility and utilizes frames of reference that are familiar to the people. Its applicability lies in utilizing familiar idioms, proverbs, songs and dances, folklores and other arts to motivate people to uphold their rich cultural values.

## **CONCEPTUALIZING FOLK MEDIA**

Historically, folk media have often played a role in the communication and promotion of new ideas and the adjustment to a new social or political order, apart from its traditional role of preserving and teaching established values. Folk media which originated as a consequence of people's need to express themselves have gained a lot of relevance in the past few years in reaching out to the people, particularly the rural masses as avenue for preserving age long traditions of Africans. Folk media, a term used to denote "people's performances" refers to the performing arts which can be described as the cultural symbols of the people. Folk media are the traditional media of a particular community or nation used historically for communication. In another sense they could be regarded as non-electronic media which work as part of a people's culture and as vehicles of transmitting tradition from one generation to another. Folk media includes arts and crafts, folk dance, rural drama and musical variety of the village people etc. Several authors have provided definitions on the concept of folk media.

Ugboajah (1983 p. 22) states that "oramedia...are functional and utilitarian by way of definition. Their most important purpose is to provide teaching and initiation, with the object of imparting traditional aesthetics, technical, social, ethical and religious values".

Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998 p.3) defines folk media as "any form of endogenous communication system which by virtue of its origin and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilization of the values, symbols, institutions, and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualities and attributes." Folk media are often used for personal as well as group information sharing and discussion and draw their popularity from their entertaining nature. Types of folk media include storytelling, puppetry, proverbs, visual art, drama, role-play, concerts, gong beating, dirges, songs, drumming and dancing.

Dissanayake (1977) described folk media as media that employ the idiom of the people and the symbols which are readily intelligible to them that reach a part of the population that is impervious to the influence of mass media and that demand active participation in the process of communication.

Ranganath, (1976), defines folk media as being intimate with the masses, rich in variety, readily available at low cost, relished by different age groups and by both sexes, theme carriers traditionally and having greater potential for persuasive communication, face-to-face communication and instant feedback.

Khan (2010) sees folk media as the traditional media based on sound, image and sign languages that exist in the form of traditional music, drama, dance and puppetry with unique features in every society, race and region.

Jussawalla and Hughes (1984) provide a lucid definition and description of folk media by saying that they are made up of ...those systems of communication which have relied historically on informal channels to convey information and which obtain their authority from the cultural mores, traditions, and customs of the people they serve.

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One could glean from these definitions that folk media as tools of communication are developed from the very old and deep-rooted beliefs, customs, and rituals practised by the people. Folk media represent a form of communication employing vocal, verbal, musical and visual folk art forms, transmitted to a society or group of societies from one generation to another. They are indigenous modes and have served the society as tools/medium of communication for ages.

Many Africans especially in remote rural areas live a long way from the global information highway. In many rural villages, there are no satellite dishes or computers but these villages maintain a rich communication environment that predates modern electronic media in many years. Folk media are culturally credible when used receptively to disseminate messages aimed at changing behaviour because it is an integral part of rural life. The use of non-verbal signs and gestures are easily understood by villagers. Panford *et al* (2001) opine that the power of folk media in changing behaviors in rural Africa results largely from the media's originality and the audience's belief and trust in the sources of the messages, which often come from people that are real to their audiences.

Traditional folk media are cultural resources that accumulate indigenous knowledge, experiences and expressions passed down from generation to generation woven into proverbs and poems, songs and dances, and stories, rhythms and beat. Traditional African songs and stories teach and speak of heroic deeds of African leaders; the proverbs and wise sayings are media of instructions and wisdom on all aspects of life. They also capture historical landmarks that serve as a guide for charting ways forward in management of life in traditional societies. They are embedded with a story sense of cultural identity which can be a potent force for development. Folk media are used to communicate entertainment, news, announcements, persuasion, and social exchanges of all types. They are a means by which a culture is preserved and adapted.

All these folk media used in rural areas are spontaneous, as it is used for different purposes. But the basic purpose for this study is folk media as an educative and entertainment channel used in promoting African values.

## **CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF FOLK MEDIA**

Folk media which comprises of a broad range of art forms has evolved as grass root expressions of the values and life styles of the people, dealing with values as well as information. Folk media forms preserve and disseminate the wisdom, tradition and culture of our ancestors. It is used for entertainment, as well as to promote education,

cultural values, cultural identity, and continuity. Some of the principles underlying the use of folk media in promoting values in the African setting lies in their strengths which according to Nicholls (1997) include: their active participation, direct observation, self-directed learning, learning in group setting, peer learning imitation, role modeling and expert instruction. Some of the potential characteristics of folk media in the service of social concerns include:

1. Folk media, as ancient forms of art, is very close to the heart of the people. This is because it is in their person or simply speaking, it runs in their blood. Hence, whenever it is performed or enacted by anyone in a society, most of the masses feel like joining it and closely enjoy it to the maximum.
2. It is physically very close to the people: Most of the folk and traditional media are performed in close proximity with the people's gathering. Thus, its effect on the masses is much greater than that of the mass media.
3. Scope for repeat performances: In Folk media, there is ample scope for repeating a performance if the masses watching it like it. And the audiences can also take part in it, by becoming themselves a part of the performing team. But in the case of mass media where programmes are broadcast only once and simultaneously, it lacks repeat performance.
4. Use of language and costumes: Every type of folk and traditional media has to be essentially based upon the local ethos and culture of the people. Thus, the costumes, language used, the settings and the background must invariably bear the stamp of that locality and general culture of the area.
5. It is dynamic: It changes with the times, embracing new elements from time to time. This is why its contents change in different eras. Once the event it wants to address has been achieved, it is dropped.
6. It appeals to the emotion rather than the intellect, so they easily get the desired feedback.

## **FOLK MEDIA: AN EDUTAINMENT CHANNEL FOR PROMOTING AFRICAN VALUES**

The promotion of African cultural values will no doubt remain if our folk media is sustained. Folk media is often regarded as an *Edutainment* channel because it uses the education and entertainment channels in providing valuable information needed in any society. Edutainment according to Singhal et al (2004) involves the process of purposively designing and implementing a media message to both educate and entertain in order to increase audience member's knowledge about an issue, create favourable attitudes and change overt behaviours at the individual, community and society levels. Edutainment often have a special appeal to young people and thus presents a special opportunity to affect norms before they are fully set.

Many rural communities utilize folk media for communication of cultural messages. In the African context, sensitive information is seldom passed in a straightforward manner but through songs, dances and plays using proverbs and idioms. For instance, elders often make use of proverbs in passing on important information, especially during village gathering, when people are engaged in household chores or work outside the house they sing songs that speak about various experiences from their world. When village elders come together to listen to complaints made by someone from the village, they use proverbs and riddles to express themselves. Sometimes they will even tell a folktale, which reinforces the point they want to make. In this way, wisdom is shared and passed on from generation to generation.

Historically, folk media play a role in promoting African cultural values. It is viewed as a communication vehicle for promoting and improving African values. Some of the folk media that were examined in this paper include:

### **1. Folk Music:**

Folk music provides the medium through which a peoples' worldview is made salient in a community. Oftentimes folk music is useful in disseminating traditional wisdom, relaying the history of a people as well as teaching and informing people about their *Africanness*. Unlike most contemporary music that glamorizes sex and encourages westernization, especially among youths, most folk music carries messages and decries antisocial tendencies in a community such as laziness, promiscuity, selfishness and willful pride. Nicholls (1985) opines that music sometimes acts as social critique and serves as a vehicle for social regulation. They can also be used to extol positive virtues such as hard work, modesty, moderation, self-discipline etc. Folk music has been passed down from generation to generation. Folk tunes were used to popularize songs and glories of men who came back victoriously from war.

Some notable folk musicians who have used their music to entertain and educate includes: Sir Warrior, Oliver de Coque, Onyeka Onwenu, Chief Stephen Osadebe, Mike Ejeagha and a host of others. Their music have always been noted to carry some cultural denotations which educate the rural masses, entertain them, expose social vices which of course promote African culture and values and also make the masses know their left from their right.

Among the Igbos of the South eastern part of Nigeria, different traditional music or songs are used to convey messages and educate the masses on social vices. Folk songs are used to criticize or satirize a person who has questionable character. For example, in Awka area of Anambra state, night masquerades (Onyekulie) through songs satirize or criticize people who indulge in negative behaviour in the community. This is aimed at correcting such vices and discouraging other people from indulging in them. Mike Ejeagha's songs which are full of parables and the essence of Igbo culture indeed tell stories of African

culture. One of his songs "ICHIE EGWU" was used to educate the younger as to know how they came into existence and how their culture came to be. Music was used by Onyeka Onwenu and Sunny Ade to educate the masses on the dangers of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS); advising them to be careful and avoid keeping multiple sex partners or use condoms when having sexual intercourse. Page | 8

When the government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari put the legislation of abortion to debate, an Igbo minstrel, Prince Morocco Maduka through his song and music called on the people to reject the legislation of abortion in Nigeria.

## 2. Folklores And Storytelling

Folklores and storytelling constitute a common feature in most African traditional societies. According to Nwuneli (1983), folklore touches every aspect of life; stories of war, great men, events, and happenings which used to be the essence of our living before the intrusion of modern media. Essentially, it is used to teach morals and values as expected in any society. Nwuneli (1981) observes that the importance of folklore lies in their effectiveness in teaching moral and socialising the young into internalising the important values and knowledge of the society because within stories, narrators can infuse information on morals, condemn evil and commend goodness. Folklore touches every aspect of life, it is a medium that plays a very important role in the socialization of children in African communities because the medium is primarily used to educate and inculcate the traditional social values into the children apart from entertaining them. For the old people, the folklore serves as means of social control, especially in reinforcing the traditional values that have already been acquired. Such traditional values include honesty, integrity, hardwork, faithfulness etc. Folk stories that are commonly told to children are those with themes that mainly encourage love for others (especially between step brothers and non-kins), contentment, hardwork and respect for elders. There are also those meant to discourage greed, acts of roguery, laziness, dereliction of duty and refusal to run errands especially for elders. These themes tend to reinforce the traditional values of the African which is embedded in their culture. Conventionally, folklores and storytelling takes place at night after dinner when the children all gather around the elderly ones to listen to their stories. The children are allowed to participate by contributing to lessons learnt from the stories; and the children are encouraged to adhere to the positive sides always. In this way, folklores are used to promote acceptable behaviour among the listeners.

## 3. Folk dances:

Africa, specifically, Nigeria, is a land of diverse cultures and traditions. Each region of the country has a unique culture which is also prominently visible in

its various performing art forms. Almost all the regions of the country have their specific folk music and dance which proves to be a wonderful way of expression of their community and its traditional values. Though, these folk dances are not as complex as the classical dance forms but they are very beautiful because of the essence of rawness in them.

The folk dances of any community are performed on almost every special occasion and festival to express ecstasy. Even the Igbo's in the Diaspora are not left out in promoting their cultural heritage, they usually hold a programme called "IGBO-FEST" which features spectacular traditional cuisine, and live entertainment including Atilogwu dance and Ojionu masquerades. Men and Women display different dance troupes, which create much fun and entertainment for children, the young and everybody in general. These dances are used in celebration of important feasts and to show case the rich culture of Nigeria; especially to the younger generation who may not have opportunity of coming down to their roots. For example, the Atilogwu dance is magnificent in rhythm and physical acrobatic movements. Dancers throw stunts to cheer the audience. The most interesting part of a folk dance is the attire required for its performance. Every folk dance has its own specific costumes and jewelry, which differ from dance to dance. Ladies beautify their bodies with cam wood *uli*, they draw lines to form a pattern on their body. They wear half clothes to cover their breasts, decorated with beads around their waists. Their customs are very bright and colorful; with traditional jewelries that give a folk touch to the performance. During the performances of such folk dances, people from different sections of the society come together which may provide a chance to address them collectively, using the message through the folk dance to improve their values.

#### **4. Fairs and Festivals.**

During festivals and other colourful events in a community, people of all sects, castes and religion come together and join in the merry making. Processions are held, prayers are offered, gifts are exchanged and people dance and sing during these multi coloured events bringing out the true colours of rich African culture. In Africa, especially Nigeria, fairs and festivals which are an integral part of the life of the people play an important role in attracting tourists to the country and showcasing their rich cultural heritage. One of the examples is the "IRI JI OHURU", the new yam festival which marks the coming of new yams. Other festivals like the Argungu festivals in Kebbi state promote the culture of Nigeria and Africa.

Religious festivals are important institutions which contribute significantly in promoting the sense of value in a community. Examples of such religious festivals include Christmas for Christians, Eid-el-Fitri for Muslims and Ogun festivals for pagans. Masquerades are highly symbolic and talk more about the

community. Masquerades are high forms of entertainment among traditional African groups. The masquerades are mainly adolescent children that serve for purposes of entertainment and educating the masses informally. Their performance evokes wide variety of significant ideas or values concerning social-cultural and religious aspects of the traditional people. For example, the “EGBU ORUMAMU” of the Igala people in Benue (middle belt) of Nigeria belongs to the village groups and is performed twice a year (beginning and end of farming seasons). Also, the “MUO ANYASI” masquerade in Igbo land is used for correcting social vices in the village.

## CONCLUSION

Historically, the folk media has a role in promoting African values. For example, during the colonial era, the folk media was used to ridicule the oppressors, present strategies for resistance and rally popular support for independent movement.

When we look at the urban scenario, it becomes difficult to appreciate the relevance of folk media in minimizing the ever increasing social problems. Separately and collectively, folk media have provided education and entertainment for the rural folks in promoting African values. Folk tunes were developed to convey even instructional messages and that educated the masses on the change of right hand drive in Nigeria.

The Traditional folk performing arts, traditions and customs have long lasting impact on the society and culture. Though, globalization, economic liberations and modern forces of change appear to have made inroads into the traditional African society.

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