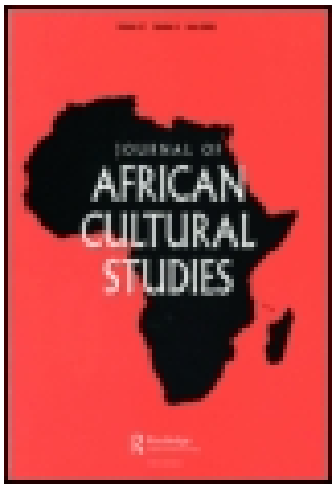

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Rethinking indigenous media: rituals, 'talking' drums and orality as forms of public communication in Uganda

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ABSTRACT *The current discourse on globalization has many far-reaching implications not only for African economics and politics, but also for the vital question of how we communicate in a 'global village'. African governments and their development partners often tend to extrapolate communication models from the developed world and apply them wholesale in local environments in Africa that are quite unique. This paper argues that such communication strategies often do not impact on the rural masses for which they are meant because they are not 'contextualized' to the local settings, cultural dialectics and worldview of the people. The bulk of the rural people are non-literate, poor and have little or no access to modern mass media such as television, radio, film, newspapers, the internet and email. The roll-out of modern media should continue to occupy centre stage in planning by African governments, development agencies and non-governmental organizations, and these modern media should continue to be used to disseminate various campaign messages (HIV/AIDS awareness, immunization of children, maternal health care, poverty eradication, etc.) to the communities. But given the dearth of these media in many poor countries, the limitation of their coverage to the urban centres, and the costly equipment involved, a strategy that relies solely on them has its drawbacks. Communication planners should not overlook the significant role indigenous forms such as popular theatre, drumming, village criers, storytellers, orators, etc., have played – and continue to play – in communication among rural, poor communities. The paper illustrates the ways in which these media continue to be utilized in development communication in Uganda, for instance, because of the way they are embedded in the cultural ideology of the rural people.*

1. Introduction

Within the global discourse on globalization and its implications, the search for a common means of communication is an important strand. Development in Uganda takes place within a society in which the urban section of the population, some 5 per cent, has some access to contemporary forms of communication while the predominantly rural community still relies on indigenous media to communicate amongst themselves.

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Indigenous media and their role in communicating development messages in African societies and communities could be utilized as one of the most respected, trusted and acceptable forms of development communication in Uganda. Communication as a process is hinged on the cultural dialectics within a society. Since culture shapes the environment within which a message is decoded, indigenous media forms such as very specific performances – dance, music, drama), drums and horns, village criers, orators and storytellers – continue to present themselves as effective channels for disseminating messages in predominantly rural societies where the population tends to be predominantly 'orate'[1] or 'oral-ate' rather than 'liter-ate'. Oralate societies are characterized by low literacy rates and low levels of technological development.[2] In Uganda, the literacy level for men is about 54 per cent and for women 46 per cent (see Malinga 1998). In 2002, Uganda was ranked 150 out of 173 countries on the Human Development Index, which measures a country's achievement in education, life expectancy and income levels (*Human Development Report 2002*, United Nations).

Modern mass media, then, have remained largely inaccessible to the majority of Ugandan communities not just because of the low literacy level, but also because of the lack of hardware, software and supporting infrastructure of computer-accessed communication. Consequently, these media cannot be seen as essential to communication in predominantly rural societies.

In these primarily oralate societies, indigenous media were – and are still – strong where information is transmitted orally from generation to generation. The messages are usually enhanced by the use of song, dance, drama, or drums and horns. In any community it is the older people, men and women, who hold most information in memory through song, poetry and other forms of recitation. Logistically, therefore, in the absence of written records, it is the elders who have always acted as the custodians of knowledge. These 'person-centred' media are thus an integral part of the people's culture and, of course, in the eyes of development agencies, a cheap way to communicate.

So, in the quest for globalization, the way forward in the new millennium should consist not so much in an aggressive quest to provide modern media to people as in harnessing and modernizing 'traditional' forms of communication as viable tools for development.

In this paper, I intend to look at some specific forms of indigenous communication in Uganda and the various ways in which they are currently used as vehicles of communication. Each of these forms is itself a mode of

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1 The term 'orate' was coined by Ugandan scholars A. Bukenya and P. Zirimu, to designate an 'oral' rather than 'written' tradition. The study of the oral performance and literature of such societies was termed 'orature'. See Zirimu and Bukenya (1977). In contemporary literary discourse, the term 'orality' is preferred.

2 Harding (1978) contends that this puts an unjustifiable emphasis on the *absence* of skills and prefers the term 'oralate' which privileges the skills of those people who have sophisticated oral–vocal and listening skills.

performance and it is to performance that I first turn briefly in order to contextualize drumming and vocal communication.

2. Rituals of indigenous communication

There are similarities in the indigenous media of many African societies – both in the forms of communication and in their roles in society. I first consider performances which take the form of ceremonies or rituals in society and which are performed as real life situations. Although the term is problematic, I want to refer to this as 'ritual theatre' in order to identify it as a form of performance which is anchored within a people's belief system. It is keyed into formal structures of transition or life changes and demonstrates sufficient features of entertainment, spectacle and narrative to justify defining it as a distinctive block of ritual and performance practice to be called 'theatre'.

Ritual theatre invariably requires participation and is a way of communicating information centred on life changes. The circumcision ceremonies among the Bagisu and Sabiny peoples of Uganda as well as okwanjula , a marriage introduction ceremony, and okwalula abalongo, the ceremonial rites surrounding twins, both of which are practised among the Baganda, are examples. These, as Okot p'Bitek says, were

> indigenous performances at births, circumcision, marriage or funeral ceremonies that permeated the daily cycles of the people, who were at the same time the performers and spectators, commentators and addressees, but in any case participants in the performance (Mbowa 1999: 228).

The late Rose Mbowa, too, noted that such performance:

> does not distinguish between ... real life and stage action... It lives in the form of integrated theatre where everyone participates in the performance of integrated song, dance, mime and drama (ibid.).

Closely knitted into the people's culture, ritual theatre is entertaining, didactic and symbolic. It utilizes verbal elements and material culture of the people to communicate an ideology and philosophy. Rituals are often rites of passage. Among the Bagisu, the imbalu (male circumcision rites) denotes the passage from childhood to adulthood; among the Sabiny people, female genital cutting serves the same purpose and initiates undergo a number of ceremonial rites over several months. Historically, in Buganda and Ankole, marriage is only considered valid after the okwanjula and okuhingira ceremonies respectively have been performed; the church ceremony is secondary. Similarly the okwalula abalongo ritual in Buganda is vital for the survival and good health of twins for, if it is not performed, it is believed that some calamity might befall the twins.

Since this form generally thrives on a common ideology and general participation of people, it does not concentrate only on language-based communication but also very effectively utilizes paralinguistic aspects of communication. This physical factor hugely increases the emotive impact of the message on the people's psyche and is so powerful that it is not easy to undo. This is one reason why government efforts to stop female circumcision among the Sabiny have achieved little success. For instance, the Sabiny take any anti-

female circumcision crusade as an infringement on their cultural rights bequeathed to them by the ancestors of the tribe, who decreed that it should be done as a symbol of ritual cleansing. They thus always gang together in the face of attempts by government and politicians to stop the practice. In 1992 the government of Uganda launched a campaign to end female circumcision among the Sabiny using forceful means but instead the number of girls excised that year, in fact, increased dramatically (*The New Vision* 6 December 1994). As a result the then Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Frances Kuka, who led that campaign and is herself a Sabiny, subsequently lost her seat in Parliament in the next general elections.

Because of the vital way in which ritual theatre resonates a widely held ideology and cultural beliefs, both government and non-governmental organizations have recognized its significance and utilized it extensively as a major tool in development programmes. This has been shown to be particularly true in furthering knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS in Uganda (see, for instnace, Harding 1998: 13).

3.1 'Talking' drums and sounding horns

The idea of 'talking' drums implicitly calls up a notion of transmission of information. Drums that 'talk' imply a different purpose from those that are sounded in order to entertain. The use of drums and horns is widespread throughout Ugandan society. They are mainly used as a medium of mass communication to transmit important, urgent messages to a relatively large audience. They may be sounded to summon people for public meetings, to community work, or to announce war or a far reaching calamity, or else the death of an important person such as an elder or chief. In some parts of Uganda such as Lango, Bunyoro, Busoga and Buganda societies, horns are also used to announce hunting expeditions. The message is decoded from the different sounds made by the drums or horns; different messages can be decoded by people who have learnt, aurally and orally, their meanings since childhood. In other words, it is a learned skill, just as are the literacy skills of writing or communication via the computer.

There is a range of different sounds, rhythms and drums as well as drummers available for use in communication. Which ones are used depends on the occasion, the message and the sender. For instance, in Buganda the `saagala agalamidde` drumbeat has always been used to summon people for communal work. It is currently utilized by the Kabaka (king) of Buganda to mobilize his subjects to participate in contemporary communal projects like clearing roads, planting trees to prevent deforestation, or de-silting village wells. A different rhythm and sound, usually on a different drum, `mujjaguzo`, on the other hand, may either herald the ascent of a Kabaka to the throne or announce the arrival of the Kabaka at a particular function. Without the drummed announcement, the ritual of crowning the king would not be complete. The `mibala` drumbeat has more than one function: it can be played either as the anthems of the different clans or else as drumming for entertainment or dancing the `bakisimba`. The

reason for this dual usage is that the bakisimba dance identifies the clan and people like to dance it as a reiteration and celebration of identity within the Buganda Kingdom. There are several variations on bakisimba, each proclaiming a specific identity. In each case, the drums are played to a different rhythm and people hear, recognize and acknowledge the significance.

In Busoga, they have the gadhembwike drumbeat for work-related parties; bayiga nsolimo, which summons people for communal work and meetings; mukidi, which announces war, death and other calamities, while nabisiza is used on other ceremonies.[3] In Ankole and Bunyoro, the drumming of katwara bafu and kanga baije respectively alert people that all is not well, and may be used to announce a person's death.

As well as the specificities of who can play which drums and which drumbeats on what occasion, there remains another key feature to be considered in using drumming as communication.

This is the time of drumming. The drums cannot be played at anytime. Just *when* they are sounded is equally important. Usually played in the morning or in the evening, this is partly because it is the time when the intended listening audience is at home, rather than out on the farms or at other work or else out at the market, and partly because of the technical consideration. This is when minimum noise interference is likeliest and so, like any public broadcasting system, the conditions for the clearest transmission are sought. People knew how to circumvent what Shannon and Weaver[4] discovered much later, namely that noise is a dysfunctional factor because it interferes with the message in the communication channel, and hence it should be minimized in order to have effective communication.

If these, then, are some of the ways in which drumming is used – as it has been for centuries, as far as we can tell – then it is to an even older instrument, the human voice, that I now turn and consider the various ways in which it too has survived as an essential medium of broadcasting and public communication.

3.2 The matalisi *or village crier: a contemporary example*

The village criers are an essential and ubiquitous feature of village life. They are the broadcasters of urgent messages from the leaders to the local people. They are the bearers of community information, related perhaps to communal work, or to war or to calamity or else they announce an important village meeting with the chief, king or other leader. In Buganda, the matalisi usually carries a drum to call the attention of the people just as in West Africa, a gong or ogene, may be used among the Igbo in Nigeria.

In terms of contemporary mass media, such broadcast information functions have largely been taken over by a 'secretary for information and mass mobilization' in local government structures within Uganda. For instance, during the late nineties, when I was staying in the village of Nakulabye, Katende zone, in central Uganda, local council officials had the practice of disseminating

[3] Interview with C. Afunadula, aged 70, 23 October 1999.
[4] See McQuail and Windahl (1981: 12) and Fiske (1990: 6–10).

information using a village crier, a role that was performed by the local council's own 'secretary for information'. In this instance it was a woman, a modern sort of break from long-established practice. This official went around the village at dawn drumming at every residence and then announcing whatever message the local council had for the residents – usually to do either with council meetings or else with cholera awareness and immunization campaigns. This placed responsibility for action and response onto each individual resident. It was effective in its outcome because this 'interpersonal' nature of indigenous forms not only allowed for easy encoding, decoding and feedback, but also made it incumbent on the 'message-receiver' to respond to the message because of the shared relationship with the 'senders'. None of these features is equally automatically present in newer forms of communication.

The crier would also digress from the main message in order to give special messages to particular residents of the village – especially if it was an issue that local council officials were not happy about. On one occasion, she stopped at the gate of one of my neighbours and announced:

> You residents of this house, we thank you for keeping your homestead tidy. But we don't like the way you throw rubbish over your fence. It is becoming a health hazard. Why don't you dig a rubbish pit and dispose of your rubbish properly?

To the next set of neighbours, she drummed and remarked:

> And you who stay in this house, take note that the residents of the village are fed up with your practice of dumping polythene bags along this road. Some of the polythene bags contain things that don't pass through the mouth … You are the ones causing the cholera epidemic in our village![5]

On two different occasions, this warning was repeated by the village crier, this time more threateningly than on the first occasion, and the neighbours had to dig a rubbish pit, and stop the practice of throwing polythene bags along the road, in order to maintain good relations with the local council officials and the residents. Indigenous media, therefore, have the added quality of being a shared voice of the community to which people respond more readily.

3.3 The orator or public speaker

The orator or formal public speaker is yet another role, different from that of the village crier. Rhetoric or oratory is a highly prized talent and, like storytelling, is often fraught with political tension, for good oratorical skills are often the basis of someone's ascendancy to a position of leadership. Associated with maturity, wisdom and experience, elders provide the model for orators.

The orator is essentially a highly persuasive communicator who is entrusted with the duty of being a spokesperson for the people. Thus whilst the village crier is at the behest of the chief or elders or council, the orator speaks on behalf of the people. He may therefore carry the requests, wishes or complaints of the people to the elders or chief. For instance, the public speaker is a key figure in matters of resolving disputes; an emissary or messenger for the community; a go-between in

[5] Based on the author's experience in Nakulabye, Kampala.

marriage ceremonies; a mobilizer, propagandist, debater and even legislator. In oratory, the use of language rich in proverbs, anecdotes, idioms, images and symbols, is highly prized.

3.4 Storytelling: a contemporary example

Storytelling is another form of indigenous media. In this instance it is charged, as we shall see below, with the politically all-important task of transmitting the history – myths, legends, folktales and fables – from generation to generation. Storytellers are the encyclopedias of the society's history, culture, values and practices which embody moral, religious and ideological instruction to younger generations. As Mwalimu Nyerere, the late President of Tanzania, remarked, storytelling sessions were the classrooms where wisdom was imparted to the young ones before the advent of a more formally structured style of education.

In most societies in Africa, the storytellers are reference points for the people and their role is specialized; it is not conferred on anybody at will. Generally, the public role of storyteller is assigned to men, while women take up the more private role of domestic storyteller to children and each other, but in Uganda, in 1999 Omumbejja the Princess Irene Ndagire, a controversial woman, claimed to be the de facto custodian of the Kasubi Tombs *(*Amasiro*)* where the deceased kings *(*Bassekabaka*)* of Buganda are buried. However, despite her attempted 'palace coup' to usurp that position, which she alleged she had legitimate claim to, the Kabaka of Buganda appointed another lady, Omumbejja the Princess Namikka instead. This was partly because of the historical and cultural significance of the shrine, and especially of the sacrosanct, historical royal records of the kingdom, over which the custodian of the tombs presides. This followed allegations by Princess Irene Ngagire and a few other members of the royal family that king Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II is not the true son of Ssekabaka Mutesa II but was fathered by Daudi Ochieng, Mutesa's former close friend. This claim aroused a lot of anger in Mengo circles, resulting in the rebel Princess being stripped of the important position of Nalinya w'e Kasubi, a sensitive office in the Buganda kingdom. Because of the sensitivity of her allegations, and the animosity they generated in Buganda Kingdom circles, Princess Ndagire was also consequently relieved of her duties as Advisor to the President of Uganda on Poverty Alleviation. Herein lies an important dialectic: the powerful interface between modern politics and ancient folklore.

4. Indigenous media: obsolete or viable contemporary media of communication?

Indigenous forms are undoubtedly suited to communication in largely non-literate rural communities. They are a cheap way to transmit messages and are part and parcel of familiar culture.

In many of these rural and poor societies, access to modern communication forms is limited, even impossible. In Uganda, for instance, although radio and television broadcasting began in 1954 and 1963 respectively, they still do not cover areas distant from Kampala, and in most up-country locations, the

reception is very poor. The telephone, fax, email and internet facilities are still a dream.

Familiar, indigenous media, on the other hand, does not require expensive technical equipment; the drums, horns and gongs are locally made and readily available. The ceremonies through which certain information is passed on are part and parcel of the people's culture. At the inauguration of the anti-AIDS campaign in Uganda, the radio and television announcements were preceded by a ggwanga mujje drumbeat, which is sounded to alert people to calamity or danger. This drumbeat resonated a strong message to the people and statistics have shown that the response to the AIDS awareness campaign has been positive.

This reversal of a drift from local to international forms of communication utilizing anecdotes, proverbs, idioms, symbols and images that are already familiar to people has also been successfully used by President Yoweri Museveni because of his mastery of folk media polemics. During the 1996 Presidential election campaigns, for example, he compared leadership to carrying olubengo ('a grinding stone'); he talked of how the challenges of nation building and fighting poverty require each citizen to do his olubimbi ('the part of land cultivated for a day') and how past leaders are olumbugu ('couch grass', a type of weed common in gardens) because of their biased, sectarian politics. This ability has earned him immense admiration and support among ordinary people in rural communities because they can 'decode' his messages in their own cultural and linguistic context. Commenting on the effect of his use of familiar idioms on the population during the 1996 presidential elections, Museveni (1997: 209) says:

> When I told the public that those who wanted to negotiate with bandits were reintroducing olumbugu where we had already cleared the garden, the message was very clear and received most enthusiastically. A combination of these images dealt devastating blows to the opposition. I have no doubt that these images increased our support by anything up to 20 per cent, because they clarified people's perception of the problems.

The reason for this is that people were immersed in these codes and symbols. This can be compared to the sense in which people feel alienated from the modern mass media as channels for 'them' (usually government, or the developed world) rather than 'us' (the local people). Thus people often say 'the radio said...' in a detached tone, indicating the 'otherness' of radio as a channel of communication alien to them.

That is why modern Ugandan artists are also trying to utilize these traditional forms to make their message more culturally relevant. The Bakayimbira play *Ndiwulira* was perhaps very successful during the AIDS awareness campaign because of its vivid re-enaction of the folk tale of the ndiwulira weevil, which was boiled alive because it didn't heed advice to quit the maize cob before it was cooked. The message was that those ndiwuliras who refused to abstain from sex or to engage in safer sex would be doomed like the maize weevil. The impact of the message was thus enhanced through cultural contextualization.

Nevertheless, this article should not be construed as an attempt to glorify indigenous communication forms to the detriment of access to more

contemporary forms. The indigenous forms have their limitations. No society can certainly continue surviving on an oral system of information management when libraries, museums hold vast stores of information in perpetuity; computers, and the world wide web, email communication along with television transmission, radio broadcasting and the mobile telephone or 'cell phone' and other audio-visual equipment are becoming available.

The problems associated with verbal 'encyclopaedias', that is, genealogists or oral historians, exist because, as always, they eventually die. Whilst of course this has always been the case, the difference nowadays is that there may not be a younger person who is willing to take his place and take on the massive task of memory involved in transmitting the stored information orally.

In the process of the oral transmission of information, such information may suffer substantial distortion either deliberately (probably for political reasons) or inadvertently simply from failure of memory or from unexpected early loss of life, perhaps in a road accident. With growing modernization, cultural heterogeneity through linguistic and ethnic cross-fertilization is undoubtedly increasing, and with it a new global culture is emerging especially among the younger generation of Ugandans. Formal education, too, is increasingly changing the norms of communication. In this new international culture localized indigenous media have their drawbacks.

In spite of this inexorable movement, given the slow process of change in the greater part of our societies, and the unavailability of resources to cope with the information technology revolution, indigenous media will remain a vital tool of communication in the third millennium.

Of course in Uganda as elsewhere, there is need to develop and keep abreast of new technology in order to communicate effectively. To connect all our village peasants to the internet may be a laudable goal, but even as we think globally, we still need to act locally in order to preserve the cultures and communication forms that deserve to be preserved *in their own right*.

It is with this in mind, that I suggest that indigenous media forms can be made more versatile and relevant in the next millennium, through indigenization, hybridization and borrowing and discarding.

5. Hybridization and indigenization

Hybridization is premised on the fact that there should be cross-fertilization of ideas. In communication, a hybrid model of both indigenous and modern systems is advocated by Wole Soyinka.[6] The danger associated with attempting to totally scrap all indigenous social, economic and political systems and entirely replace them with modern (foreign) ones was presented through President Kongi, the central figure in Soyinka's play *Kongi's Harvest,* who tried to do this with disastrous consequences for himself and his society.

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6 Wole Soyinka is, in some sense, sceptical of modernity and is a strong advocate of hybridization of traditional and modern systems in his works such as *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) and *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963).

Ugandan artists have, with great success, 'hybridized' modern and familiar forms to suit better the local setting. Local drama groups like the Kampala group Bakayimbira have successfully used this approach to create awareness in the population about issues like combating AIDS, alleviating poverty, condemning child abuse and fighting corruption. Many plays such as John Ruganda's *The Floods*, Robert Serumaga's *Majjangwa and Nakirijja* and Karooro Okurut's *The Curse of the Sacred Cow* are also all good examples of attempts to blend western drama conventions and local art forms to communicate a message. As we saw earlier, President Yoweri Museveni has been particularly successful in his political mobilization of the population because of his ability to use traditional idioms, proverbs, symbols and other rhetorical devices to communicate his message to local people. Recourse to bulungi bwa nsi, (a 'community participation spirit'), in infrastructure maintenance by Kabaka Mutebi's kingdom, using Radio Buganda, is also an effective tool moving in the right direction.

Artists are doing a great service to Ugandan art by producing a hybrid of indigenous Ugandan and modern music, using local and western instruments. Currently, perhaps some of the popular hits like Steve Jean's *Kaggwa Yalayira*, which was specially composed for the Kabaka's wedding, Halima Namakula's *Ekimbeewo*, Richard Kawesa's *Ssemusajja Agenda*, or *Obangaina* by former Afrigo Band star singer, Rachel Magola, are all hybrid models that might be emulated. Use, too, of the 'talking' drum on radio or television can continue successfully.

Indigenization is akin to hybridization, but emphasizes the attempt to localize the foreign, mainly western, conventions and make them our own. Culture all over the world has lots of similarities that could be exploited. 'Rap' music originated in Africa and in fact the Banyankore have been traditionally using it in the form of Okwevuga.[7]

6. The 'Katwe Model'

This principle is what underlies what has been called 'copy and apply' technology. Artisans in Katwe, a technologically versatile suburb in downtown Kampala, now produce sophisticated products like car parts because of a 'copy and apply' approach. This can and must be applied in communication. Information technology can be mastered and adapted to our local conditions and modes of communication. Traditional forms that are too archaic to produce good results can be discarded.

7. Conclusion

Are the indigenous media obsolete relics of a dying age? I have argued that indigenous forms have a relevance that make them still an essential mode of communication in Uganda and Africa as a whole, for although sweeping through societies at a great rate, the impact of the information technology revolution is nevertheless, by and large, limited to the urban metropolis.

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[7] Okwevuga is a traditional form of rapping in Ankole. It involves making a recitation of the heroic deeds of an individual.

Therefore, even as African governments continue to usher their population more and more into the cyber world and cyber space, the pumpkin in the old homestead should not be uprooted.

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