

Diminishing African Traditional Systems of Communication: Perception of a Lis Professional

John Abdul Kargbo

Dean, Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies, Fourah Bay College,
University of Sierra Leone, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Citation: Kargbo J.A. (2022) Diminishing African Traditional Systems of Communication: Perception of a Lis Professional, *International Journal of Library and Information Science Studies*, Vol.8, No.4, pp.1-13

This article discusses the usefulness of African traditional systems of communication and the need for archivists to preserve them for posterity. It offers a review of relevant literature and a wider discussion on African traditional systems of communication noting their importance, taxonomy, gradual distinct and the role of archivists in preserving these systems. The chapter underscores the importance of African traditional systems of communication, the challenges Africans are faced with to sustain them amidst the influence of Western media of communication in contemporary society and the need for archivists to collect and preserve these systems.

KEYWORDS: Africa, traditional systems, communication, perception, professional

INTRODUCTION

Communication issues are one of those human activities that everyone recognizes but cannot be satisfactorily defined. Communication is about talking to one another; it is the radio and television; it is social media, the Internet; it is literary criticisms; our hair styles. The list is endless. Our existence depends on communication. Without our initial backlog of genetic messages, we would not be where we are; and without the internal communication system of our bodies we could not live and function as we do. Living, therefore, largely is a matter of communicating and many people make their living by communicating with others such as broadcasters, politicians, teachers, advertisers and journalists.

Derived from the Latin word '*communicare*,' the term gives us an idea of 'sharing,' 'commune,' and 'communist.' It refers to the imparting, conveying and exchanging of ideas and knowledge whether by speech, writing or signs. Communication involves the transfer of thoughts and messages as contrasted with the transportation of goods and persons with the basic forms being signs (sight) and sound (hearing). Communication is based on a relationship and this relationship may exist between persons or between one person and many; between collective society and an individual and between society and a group. Human beings also communicate with each other and with machines. Man is communication system; he receives sensory stimuli from his environment and these raw data are transferred or recorded initially in the sense organs and subsequently in successive centres of the nervous system. They are transmitted over nerve trunks from one station to another and amplified in the course of transmission. The information is added to and stored lengthy or short periods and aid decision

making. Communication, as well as satisfying the urge within us, makes it possible for us to draw upon the nervous systems of others and learn what nervous systems have missed.

The essence of man's nature is the capacity to share the transmitted legacy of social expansion which is expressed in symbolic form; and a further extension of the capacity in his ability to influence or change the legacy by the contributions of his own perception. Through the media of communication the private experiences of the individual are made public and contribute to the common world picture. Man is dependent on others for his ability to communicate; for warmth; and for shelter. Unlike animals man's growth and maturation extends over a lengthy period and in the achieving of his naturalism he is dependent upon other minds and upon a changing network of communication. As McLver (1965) stated 'society is a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behaviour and it is always changing' (p.5). Society cannot exist without communication and communication assumes a social network. Neither process can be treated meaningfully by itself.

The life of man as a communicator starts with his assimilation of the norms and standards of his cultural setting. From the moment of his birth he imbibes with his mother's milk the ways of knowing, doing and believing peculiar to his social group. Because communication is the means by which one person influences another and is in turn influenced by him it is the actual carrier of the social process. It organizes, stabilizes and modifies our social life and it enables us to pass on its form and meanings from generation to another. Every single act of social behaviour necessarily involves communication i.e. the interaction of our mind with that of another. This communication, in order to be effective, entails a shared understanding of what a word, look, action or gesture will mean. In other words we must share common symbols. Communication serves the function of maintaining surveillance in society and its environments and of discharging threats and opportunities which might affect members of that society.

African traditional systems of communication are aspects of African culture. And culture serves as a medium through which human minds interact with each other in communication. It provides a field of reference so that an individual can organize his world; the culture into which we are born greatly influences our perception. Consequently people from different cultures will often see things that outsiders might miss. Culture also provides the rules for communication and human interaction. Being a part of a culture means that one knows the rules of that culture. Culture and society develop our concept of self-hood through the social means provided by the agency of our homes, the family, the school and our peers, what the sociologists would call 'inference groups.'

The African Continent and Western Media of Communication

Africa has unique customs, traditions, culture and media of communication. This unique media of communication is embedded in their originality, creativity, and culture of the people which essentially make them highly effective and enduring in the dissemination of information for either personal or inter-personal and group use. The enduring nature of Africa's traditional media of communication has made its people to subsist and relevant in the modern world in spite of the emergence of varied western media of communication such as books, newspapers, journals, magazines the Internet, radio, television, social media, telex, facsimile and mobile technology.

The manifestation of the 'Global Village' theory today is the inevitable indispensability of the oral culture which Africa continues to pride itself as the innovator. Perceived by many as the cradle of civilization, Africa has a unique means of communication in the world despite the modern means of communication such as the Internet, 'WhatsApp,' 'Facebook,' 'Twitter' and 'Messenger.' Notwithstanding, the shackles of the era of imperialism (such as slavery and the slave trade, the scramble for and partition of Africa, colonialism, nationalism and the struggle for independence), have brought greater challenges to the peoples of Africa and their traditional media of communication to endure in the face of Western media of communication and their attendant technologies, sometimes referred to as '*cultural imperialism*.' Despite the dominant nature and effects of Western media of communication Africa's traditional means of communication continue to endure to date. Reflected in talking drums, folk songs, drama, festivals, town criers, traditional wears, stories, puzzles, artifacts and paintings to cite but a few examples, these traditional media are the local means of communication that remain what essentially sustain the information needs of the Africans, especially those in the rural settings.

The Traditional African Society

Archival institutions and libraries have become the great strategic resources of society in its search for direction, change, self-determination and growth. The reason being in today's world it is knowledge, as opposed to natural resources, wealth and material possessions *per se*, which has become the critical basis of progress, well-being and power. Both archivists and librarians deal with knowledge, given that knowledge is the condition of having information, the *raison d'être* of librarians and archivists' work. Accordingly, as guardians and disseminators of knowledge, archivists and librarians stand at the center of this revolutionary phenomenon.

Every culture, pre-literate or literate, produces a record that can be handed down from one generation to another, and in non-literate societies like those in Africa, this record takes the form of verbal rituals, legends, myths, poems, and ceramic, the transmission of which from generation to another is one of the principal corners of the archival profession. This is because the desire for information is a universal appetite and dissemination of ideas and knowledge as well as the systems of thought is central to the role of archivists.

Traditional African society could never have survived or even existed without its dynamic informal and viable communication networks. From antiquity Africans' habitual manner of social, personal and political intercourse has been oral. It is a manner of communication by telling and being told, involving the free flow of symbolic associations, wise cracks and proverbs, poems, festive songs, riddles and tongue twisters. Chinua Achebe, in his book '*Things Fall Apart*' (1959) cited that the art of communication is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. The impact of this oral form of communication does not only derive significance but also from its emotional appeal tonal texture, the communicator's physical gesticulations, facial expressions and the total effect created by the message. It involves audience participation and impromptu interjections, constant feedback and communal queries and criticisms. This system of communication has its own grammar, style and aesthetic canons. Its strength and weakness lie in its exclusive reliance upon memory and re-call. The word-of-mouth, the beating of drums, the lighting of bush-fires, as well as the non-verbal or body language and signals feature among the varied means of transmitting messages in pre-colonial Africa. It is some mystery of the communication process that defines the social importance of the medicine man, the priest, and the seers and tellers of the future. In his research on the early activities of West African intellectuals Nicol (1962)

noted that ‘the priests, medicine men and the wise old men in villages probably took the role of intellectuals in pre-historic Africa’(p.10). Dike and Ajayi (1968) observed that the accretion of the cultural heritage were part of the functions of the clan head who fulfilled specific political and religious roles within segmented societies where roles were differentiated.

Substantiating the views of Nicol as well as Dike and Ajayi, Amadi (1981) opined that information has always been given and received even in pre-industrial times. In Africa, he continued, the making and transmission of cultural beliefs was the task of priests and diviners, elders and wise men in general, not of librarians, historians or publishers in the modern sense. Accounts of the race were expressed in poetry, narratives, ritual incantation, praise and gesture songs, wise cracks, proverbs, dynastic chronologies, folk songs and tales as well as tongue twisters and riddles. Both the making and transmission of tradition varied from place to place, depending on the size, nature, beliefs and resources of each community. In pre-colonial times and to date the ‘griots,’ story tellers, elders and other knowledgeable individuals were the noted historians of society, functioning as the surrogates of indigenous African librarianship. They were not only a form of library without shelves but also served as mobile libraries that packaged and disseminated information wherever the target audience was physically located. These highly sophisticated information-carriers were able to collect, process and disseminate the cultural traditions of the past. On the level of cultural transmission and refinement, their roles were defined and unambiguous.

Africans have long possessed walking encyclopedias, proto-libraries or libraries without shelves not in terms of the paperless, push bottom modern systems but in terms of human memory constituting society’s cultural repertoire. Wilks (1970) attested that in several African communities it is common for an individual to be able to recite the names of ancestors for upwards to five generations. Even the affairs of government are frequently conducted with reference to memorized narratives transmitted orally from generation to generation. The recitation of these ‘oral texts’ is often the task of trained specialists such as the ‘*griots*’ of the Western Sudan and the Kwadon singers of Ashanti. In a more formal context tradition among Africans was transmitted through organized educational institutions such as those dealing with initiation into secret societies and age-grades, puberty rites or during apprenticeship/training of priests and diviners. These initiations were conducted ..orally according to the societal norm that stipulates that the traditions of the people be pronounced publicly. Indigenous African communication forms such as festivals, traditional institutions, folklore, drama, music, songs, dance, drums and poetry *inter alia*, are dominant sources of entertainment and they inform and reform social, moral, and human values for their societies. They help in curbing inter-tribal wars and conflicts among communities, promote peace, understanding, team-spirit and brotherhood among mankind. In rural Africa, the use of traditional communication to immensely popularize certain governments, be they economic, ideological, political, cultural and educational, is in tandem with ways of life. This is done particularly through dramatic performances especially on market days.

Traditional Oral Media Taxonomy

Two types of oral communication are imminent in Africa namely the general and specialized. The general aspects of oral communication are those affecting peoples’ life. They concern the ways in which information, ideas and feelings are conveyed from one person to another and involve the presence of subtle layers of added meaning from who is addressed, where, how and

by whom as well as the use of gestures, tone of voice and particular modes of speech. The specialized aspects of oral communication can be defined by ways in which society selects certain types of information for specialized treatment and public use, embodying them in formal patterns such as poetry, songs and stories. Accordingly, the oral medium has acquired specialized practitioners like storytellers, singers, praise poets and traditional healers all of whom have defined roles and for permitting the exposition of the communal knowledge and written for which they are the major repository. For convenience of use Wilson (1987) divided African traditional media into the following classes:

- **Idiophones.** These are self-sounding instruments like gongs, wooden drums, bells and rattles.
- **Membranophones.** These are media on which sound is produced through membrane vibration such as skin drums (*tabule, sangba, samborie and kaylain*).
- **Aerophones.** These are media that produce sound as a result of the vibration of a column of air such as family flutes, horns, trumpets and whistle reed pipes.
- **Symbolography.** This simply means symbol writing or representation wherein graphic representations are used to convey messages such as the '*Vai script*' in Libreria and the '*Ki-ka-ku writing*' of Kissimi Kamara in Sierra Leone..
- **Signs.** These are symbols or objects used to represent something. They are indexes of the existence of something else.
- **Signals.** These are physical embodiments of a message such as use of fire, gunshots and drums (wooden or skin).
- **Objectifics.** These are media presented in concrete forms like kola nuts, charcoal, white fowls, white eggs, feathers, cowries, ducks and drawings.
- **Colour schemes.** This is the general conception and use of combination of colours in a design to convey some meaning. It uses the advantage of pictorial communication
- **Music.** This includes satirical songs, praise songs and songs that criticize the wrong doings of certain individuals in communities. They are potent sources of information and the latest gossip. Itinerant musical groups are involved.
- **Extra-mundane communication.** This is communication between the living and the dead, the supernatural or Supreme Being usually done through incantation, spiritual chants, rituals, prayers, sacrifice, invocation and trance.
- **Symbolic displays.** These include smiling, sticking out the tongue, expression of anger, disgust, happiness and fear, ways of walking and sitting, gestures used, quality of voice and facial expression.

Consistent with these classes are traditional channels of communication among Africans as discussed below.

Names. These are what people are known with and are called. They communicate and tell stories about people and events/occurrences at the time of christening. Names may express a hope concerning parental disappointment or may reflect the feelings of the mother; they may even be a brief adage. For example *Yetunde* among the Yorubas means 'dead mother has come back again;' *Azuka* means 'behind is better;' and *Chukwuemeka* means 'God has done it well.' In Arab Africa *Sodiq* means 'the truth;' *Hassan* means 'first set of twins;' *Halima*, means 'gentle.' Among the Mendes *Kpahun* means 'born in the farm;' *Bahungeh* means '*don't say it;*' and in Kono *Sia* means 'first born.' *Sallay* among the Themne means 'pray day born.'

Among the Ewe *Yayra* means ‘blessing;’ *Kosi* and *Akosum* mean ‘Sunday born.’ Africans believe that there should be a correlation between the name given a child and the child’s destiny.

Venue-oriented communication channels. These include markets, village meetings, clubs and even local meetings. Africans operate varied markets some of which are open either everyday of the week or on special days. Markets provide a convenient forum to meet friends and kinsmen and exchange news and gossips, while bringing together large numbers of sellers, buyers and visitors, some from far distant places. News generated internally by the market is the statistics and price index of a particular market, the neighbouring markets and the largest market nearest to the reference village or town, gossips about current happenings or scandals in the village or town. News circulates with great rapidity through the various processes of trading.

Social gatherings. Some examples of these are death, funerals, marriages, village festivals, circumcision feasts, naming ceremonies and opening new houses, public meetings and trials, and chieftaincy gatherings which often include participants from neighbouring villages. They could be either organised or spontaneous gatherings. These social gatherings are usually occupied with gossiping, storytelling and general exchange of information.

Roads. These are not only channels but also venues of communication in Africa especially for rural dwellers. In African societies if people’s relations live in other towns or villages they travel by foot to reach their relatives during which time discussion and gossip of varied kinds take place. Some people arrange to meet at a particular road either on their way to the farm or market to exchange information.

Rivers and creeks. Like roads to upland dwellers, rivers and creeks serve swamp or riverine dwellers. At such places, people swim across streams, creeks and rivers to communicate with friends; relations hold discussions and deliver messages, information and receive same if necessary. In rivers also people meet to wash clothes and other domestic items as well as exchange information.

Traditional Authorities. These include chiefs, council of elders, market leaders, aides to traditional rulers, heads of families, religious leaders and some age grades from whom messages come for the attention of their subjects.

Socio-political groups. These include community-based organisations, religious, grassroots and economic organisations/associations such as cooperatives, kinship groups, youth groups, artisans groups and loan organisations. Although these groups differ from village to village and country to country these organisations orchestrate much communication through formal meetings of members, by messages sent about activities and obligations, and through work activities. In some instances these groups arrange folk media performances and provide opportunities for unorganised communication among members.

Gatekeepers and traditional information carriers. These are messengers and intelligent officers that disseminate information to the public. Included in this group are town criers, bell men or gong men who announce the promulgation of laws and regulations, meetings,

arrangements for communal work and generally spread 'official' information in communities. Their announcements cover everybody within communities as modern media do.

Masquerades/cults. These are essential impersonation of ancestors and in some societies they emerge at night to gossip and expose scandals like modern columnists.

The extra-mundane. This is about communication with supernatural beings such as the dead (ancestors), spirits, gods and the Supreme Being as belief system in individual cultural settings. It takes the form of cultural and individual incantations, ritual prayers, sacrifice, libations, invocation, trance and hysterisques. It may also be in the form of cultural and individual performance and invokes intensity of emotion and may lead to temporary spiritual rituals. Also this type of communication is manifested as cultural celebrations such as festivals, consecration of marriages, christening and house warming. In modern times extra-mundane take the form of obituaries, euphemistically packaged as well as memorial tunes.

The folk media. This includes folktales, proverbs and parables. Some components of folk media are festivals, plays, legends, myths, storytelling, poetry, debates, parades and carnivals. Folk media is used to transmit information from one generation to another in a ritualistic fashion. Sometimes folk media could be used primarily for entertainment and to promote education, values, cultural identity and continuity.

Natural phenomena. In Africa natural phenomena such as the blowing wind, the beating of the heart, decomposing matter, flowing rivers and streams, lightning, thunder, rainbow, appearance of a strange or rare breed of animal and birds, itching palms and cock crow especially at odd hours, amongst others, could be interpreted as communicating something of importance. These are channels by which our creator contacts and contracts activities and intentions to the children of men. God uses them to inform, alert, direct and protect us on coming events to enable Africans to be prepared and know what to do in their own interest.

Potent speech, dreams and telepathy. These are examples of top-down extra-mundane communication where a supernatural being through its priests/agents or signs communicates his/her pleasure/displeasure, directives and orders to its adherents and priests. It entails the show of supernatural capabilities.

Features of African Traditional Systems of Communication

The afore-mentioned traditional systems of communication are unique in nature. Being traditional means of communication in Africa they are transmitted from one generation to another. People grow up with them and get accustomed to them in their day-to-day interactions and are bound to live with them till eternity. Language wise, they are both verbal and non-verbal means of communication which make them appealing, effective and understandable. African traditional systems of communication serve as alternative media in the modern age because for messages to properly get to the grassroots the people must be linked up through them. They are derived from the culture and peoples' way of life; thus they are enduring. They are less expensive compared with Western media of communication as to cost and sending and receiving messages. They use indigenous technology and can also be improved upon by engineers and traditional experts in the transmission and reception of information. They are communal in nature and can be used within the confines and understanding of particular groups

of people and are very easy to understand. They are simple and less sophisticated unlike Western media, and are transmitted in the language and culture of people. They are credible; people believe in the messages of traditional media more than the exogenous media or the new media. What is more Africans believing strongly in their opinion leaders and whatever information they get from these opinion leaders they believe these leaders cannot mislead them as they are in position to serve them.

Challenges

African traditional media of communication is faced with serious challenges in the contemporary world. Following the scramble for and partition of, Africa in the nineteenth century to date there has been a rapid extinction of African languages because of the adoption of the languages of colonial masters as 'official.' This has threatened the existence of many African languages; once the language of a people is taken the whole of its culture is eroded. Further the manifestation of the 'Global Village' theory of Marshall McLuhan is a challenge to African traditional media of communication. We now have the new communication culture of the electronic age that enslaves man on the Internet, websites and social media. The erosion of Africa's cultural technology in preference for new technologies constitutes a threat to African traditional media of communication. Further Africans rely on their traditional leaders (opinion leaders) in their communication systems and this is posing a challenge to their systems of communication. The new sets of African leaders are selfish and self-centered. Most of these leaders are *protégés* of the West and this continues to undermine Africa and her media of communication. The new leaders are partisans; they colour and distort information to the people through their traditional media of communication. That notwithstanding, the social system in the African family set, community and institutions is greatly affected by the dominant Western culture which threatens Africa's traditional media of communication. The modern African child now lacks the home training and understanding of the African language; the African child no longer understands body language, paralanguage and other non-verbal codes and this constitutes a threat to traditional media of communication. Again the problems of rural-urban migration, illiteracy, poverty, ill-health and the influence of Western education and religion constitute further threats to traditional African media of communication as there is rapid erosion of African value systems in varied homes

Managing Information in Organisations

Information has become a uniquely strategic resource for any organisation, as vital as land, labour or capital and yet imbued within its own special properties that enhance its importance. Labour and capital are depleted assets while information is regenerative asset that not only grows with use, but can be used over and over in different contexts to create value in multiple ways. Within an organisation, the exchange of information and ideas among knowledge members can result in new insights that are more powerful than the individual pieces of information. Between organisations, the sharing of information and data can synergize relationships to dramatically improve the performance of the sharing parties. At the same time, the unmanaged spread of information can have debilitating consequences. Gossip and rumor can break the spirit of a healthy organisation. Information dependencies between organisations can allow stronger partners to dominate the weak. In a sense then, information is also a risk-laden resource and the outcome depends on how well an organisation manages its information resources.

Managing information is the harnessing of the information resources and information capabilities of an organisation in order to create and reinvent value both for itself and or its clientele or customers. An information-savvy organisation is an intelligent, learning organisation that is skilled at creating, acquiring, organising and sharing knowledge, and that is able to adapt its goals and behaviour to reflect the new knowledge. It thrives by the principle that only sustainable competitive edge is that based on continuous learning and constant occasion. The information-savvy organisation pursues information management as one of its core competencies. Managing information enables collective learning in an organisation and develops know-how about the effective coordination and integration of the multiple streams of information, expertise and knowledge that flow in that organisation. It provides the memory and the foresight for the organisation to adapt to and evolve with offerings. In practice the task of managing information is to plan, design and develop the organisation's structures, resources and processes to realize these objectivities.

The ability to acquire and disseminate information is often described as a source of power. As a field whose central interest is the handling of information, its storage, retrieval and delivery, archival services are typically support services and for archivists to perform effectively, it is crucial that they are conversant with not only the concepts, thinking and indeed the vocabulary of traditional communication but also the needs of those people that have versed knowledge of traditional communication systems and they have to work with to keep these systems of communication of being distinct.

Cultural Predicament

Persistent residue of cultures can be found across Africa without difficulty. There remain oral traditions, music and drama, festival, folklore and religion. Religious ideologies continue to survive and remain potent and active. But the idealization of Africa by outsiders particularly so the West has been a constant element of its history for centuries. There is inevitable conscious control of Africa which has either undermined or shattered its culture. In Africa the traditions are there especially with the older people but the educated youth have lost them. Young people from the villages are flocking to the cities but their powerful ancestors and traditions are left behind and no longer have to be propitiated. Life in the old days was based on respect for elders, a respect which still remains but in diminished form. Yesteryears the elders were honored not only because they were shortly to join the exalted company of ancestral dead but also because over the long years they have absorbed the complex form of customary wisdom which have sufficed for human needs for centuries. In such a world proverbs, riddles and moral fables are important-the rich paraphernalia of the non-literate culture; since nothing was written down all this can be passed by the old men and women of the community. Oral traditions, once so totally a part of culture are disappearing fast in large literate communities in Africa. The elaborate structures of riddles are equally diminishing; the complex rituals of greetings in some ethnic groups in Africa have been modified. Even African hair styles and costumes are being affected.

Africans never lacked communication systems. Yesteryears they had visual communication using smoke signals and drums to pass messages from one community to the other. They had body language which involved facial expression, modes of walking and gestures of all kinds. Especial significance used to be attached to tribal marks or scars which indicated tribal identity. There were also private messages such as those conveyed by the tying of knots in grass. The

more specific communications were oral and aural. Town criers were almost universal using bells, gongs, special horns or drums used for important official announcements, the inherited wisdom and the view of the world held by the community was expressed in artistic form in drama, folktales, riddle, proverbs and songs. Quite apart from its usual function singing was and still is a constant treatise in work songs found all over Africa. This brings us to ordinary conversation where a variety of talk which includes the sublime, the obscene, the abusive and the ridiculous; even the triviality of gossip has been overlooked. Markets which bring buyers and sellers together from different areas have been news and communication centres. Festivals and annual ceremonies preserve and pass on the customs by which Africans transmit the values and beliefs to the present and future generations. Religious activities were regarded as kind of social cement, binding communications together by a variety of aural and vision techniques. Witches and their enemies, the doctors, oracles and sorcerers, necromancers and diviners, prophets and priests are all interpreters of signs and symbols; essential intermediaries between the palpable world and whatever that lies beyond the veil. All these systems of communication have been massively affected. However, a necessary part of culture is the preservation of the past which is one reason why archives which preserve records of varying kinds are important cultural agencies in any society. Amidst this appalling situation of Africa's rapidly diminishing communication systems what then should archivists do to preserve its traditional systems of communication?

The Role of Archivists

Archivists collect, preserve and promote the use of unpublished documents found in a variety of formats such as manuscripts, institutional and business records, films, photographs, oral history recordings and their transcriptions, literary correspondences, microfilm and other non book materials. While the archive is one element in the total communication system by which a society is held together and a culture is created and maintained. Such an agency is a meeting place for conviviality, an ideal community centre for individual and corporate renewal. The primary function of the archive then does not only reside in the domain of records for preservation but also in the collection and interpretation of oral traditions for posterity. The Archive, like the library, is among modern society's major cultural institutions. As agent of communication this institution is a source of power, one that is derived largely from the fact that it is a storehouse of knowledge. It collects, conserves and transmits culture, assuring formal and informal education. Thus efforts made to salvage man and restore him as a free agent of society should be based on the need to balance his qualitative achievement with a concern for value. It is for this reason that every attention should be paid by archivists to preserve Africa's traditional systems of communication. In fulfilling this role archivist should join ranks with other professionals like educationists, social workers, anthropologists, sociologists, historians and psychologists.

Traditional systems of communication are aspects of oral history. This history includes the life stories and eye-witness accounts of people, their customs, traditions and values that could be recorded in varied formats such as tape recorders and CD ROMs, though interviews. The history of Africa will never be complete if this rich culture is left out. Archives are themselves communication agents whose primary function is to preserve, transmit and increase human knowledge for personal enrichment or recreation purposes. This attempt will fill in the gaps created by the absence of written records and telephony. Archivists therefore, should strive hard to ensure that traditional systems of communication are introduced in the curricula of

African education systems so that children at an early age could be educated on these treasures of human knowledge and wisdom. The fact in the main is that the written record still remains a key instrument to knowledge and communication but in the particular case of oral culture it serves as medium of historical and cultural memory and transmission. By so doing it will help the African child to develop a critical and inquiry mind.

Archives are the best institutions to play a leading role in collecting and preserving traditional media of communication, the reason being they are places to coordinate oral research. As repositories for a nation's written literature and archival heritage archives are in position to observe lacunae in a nation's history. By recording and preserving traditional media of communication in tapes and other information formats they can be easily integrated into the archives' over all research programme. Archives are also in a better position to protect the interest of participants of research and scholarly clientele. Archivists then should develop possible projects on such aspects as stories, traditional ceremonies, drama and dance, folklores, songs especially in rural Africa where people are less likely to keep correspondences. To this end archivists should seek and acquire adequate information from oral history collectors to document the provenance of traditional media of communication. They should collect, preserve and arrange traditional media of communication to assure effective future use. Archivists should prepare finding aids and publicize this genre of literature in catalogues of manuscripts and in journal publications so that scholars, researchers and other interested people could have accurate, adequate and easily available information on traditional media of communication. Archivists should provide facilities for using traditional oral media of communication including equipment for research in audible records. Equally so, archivists should develop the fullest and most equitable access policies consistent with the integrity of the repository and with agreements made with narrators in good faith. To this end interviews should be conducted and recorded in tapes, CD ROMs, the micros, DVDs, CD plates and sophisticated cell phones. Materials holding traditional media of communication should be properly labeled, indexed and catalogued for ease of access and use. Documents on traditional media of communication should be transcribed. In this direction, eye witnesses or participants in past events, usually experienced elderly community members and opinion leaders could be targeted for interview. The interviews should be selective on the basis of professional competence and skill; they could either be autobiographical, supplementary, topical or unstructured narratives. Such exercise requires continuous training given by qualified personnel who have mastery of the mindset of oral history and methodology. Over and above all, archivists should endeavour to translate and transcribe traditional media of communication from local languages into the *lingua franca* and publish this in newspapers, pamphlets and audio tapes and reference books. These can be used as focus for discussion on community development issues and concerns.

Democracy assumes that people have access to facts and opinions from a wide variety of sources including traditional media of communication. Democratic decision-making, whether at local level or not, depends on equality of access to information. Archivists with their professional skills can play a significant role in providing such access and thus aid the development process through the proper management of traditional media of communication. As preservers of the collective memory and the mind of society, archivists have an obligation to society by facilitating the flow of information and ideas and to protect the rights of individuals to have free access to varied sources of information without discrimination. Collecting and preserving traditional media of communication could be in the right direction

as it is the eye-witness accounts of those that possess traditional media of communication. To facilitate use and maintenance of recorded traditional systems communication, guidelines should be provided for their preservation, conservation and restoration. Every attempt should be made to follow sound procedures of conservation and provide adequate facilities and conditions for recorded traditional systems of communication. These efforts can be complemented by disaster planning. In order to sustain their efforts archivists should seek funding from federal, state, local businesses and industries and private organisations in order to attain their goals. Such laudable attempts should not just be done in silence; the public should be educated on the availability of documented traditional systems of communication in the archives using a variety of formats such as newspapers, magazines, directories, newsletters and union lists, brochures, as well as giving Radio and Television Talks about their relevance to society. In addition, with traditional systems of communication documented the archives can become a laboratory for archival practice especially for students and researchers anticipating a career in archives management. Such effort should not be borne by one person; synergy with organisations and people working on African traditional systems of communication is essential, amidst stringent financial support. This will ensure not only resource sharing but also cooperation and coordination of resources for effective collection and maintenance of traditional systems of communication. Archivists should conduct joint studies with other professionals working on African traditional systems of communication. In all these strides the effective collection of traditional systems of communication requires archivists who are not only trained and qualified but also have considerable knowledge of the subjects to be covered and devoted to the work. Intermittently they should carry out surveys or evaluate the existing collection which they are responsible for and make plans for future development in the field. This will ensure quality service.

CONCLUSION

Africa has all what it takes to be great and sustain her rich traditional media of communication. The continent has huge wealth, population, human and natural resources to be great. Thus attention should be paid to the study of traditional media of communication and the role of archivists in bringing this to fruition. True indeed that archivists deal largely with written documents but being fully involved in the collection and preservation of traditional media of communication could also help them provide access to a variety of sources to their numerous users. These enduring traditions of the oral culture strongly discernible in Africa are the only credible sources of information for most people especially in the rural areas. Therefore, attempts should be made by archivists in concert with custodians of these traditional media of communication to sustain them for posterity. Archivists must have the will and zest to look inwards and energize the traditional media of communication systems which have come to subsist with their unique values and effectiveness in face of the overbearing nature of the new media, mass media and globalization. As custodians of the recorded sum of human experience, archivists must possess much more than skills necessary for the organisation of records; they must also have certain knowledge about the various disciplines and the role of knowledge in society.

References

- Achebe, Chinua (1959). *Things fall apart*. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Amadi, Adolphe O. (1981). *African libraries, western tradition and colonial brainwashing*. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press.
- Davidson, Nicol (1962). "The formation of a West African intellectual community." In The Congress for Cultural Freedom. *The West African intellectual community*; p.iv. Ibadan: I U P.
- Dike, S. O. and Ajayi, J. F. A. (1968). "African historiography." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 6; pp.394-396. New York: The Macmillan Press.
- McIver, R.M.(1965). *Society : an introduction analysis*. London: MacMillan.
- Wilks, Ivor (1970). "Documentary sources of African History." In Fage, J. D. (Ed.). *African discovers her past: a survey*; pp.10-11. London: OUP.
- Wilson, Des (1987). "Traditional systems of communication in modern African development: an analytic viewpoint," *African Media Review Journal*, 1S(2), pp. 87-103.

Author Note

John Abdul Kargbo is Associate Professor of Library, Archive and Information Studies. He doubles as Dean, Faculty of Arts and ADVC 1. He is at the Institute of Library, Information and Communication Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, and can be contacted at **kargbojohnabdul@yahoo.com**