Journal
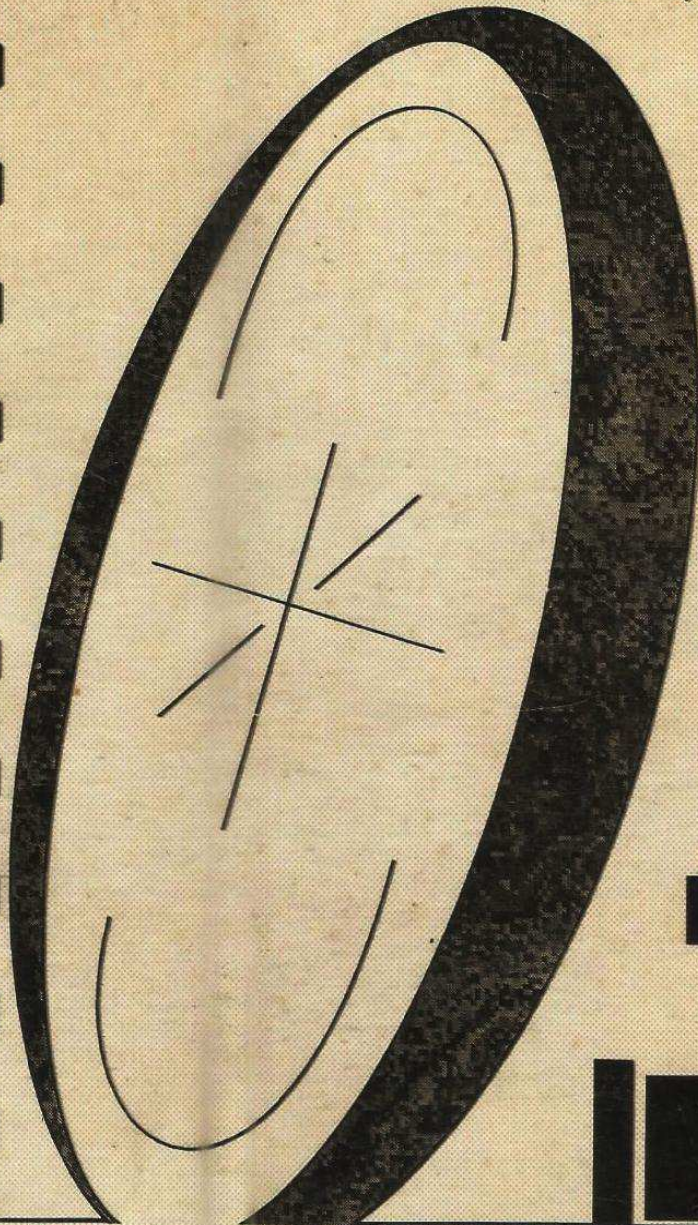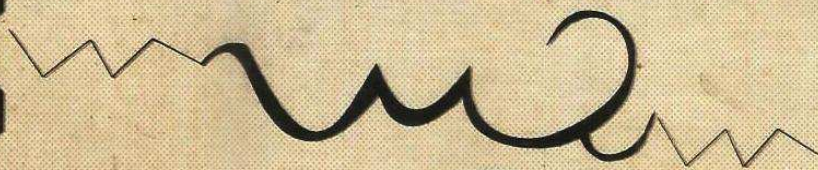
of

University Media

and Aesthetics

VOL. 1 AUGUST, 1996

TRADITIONAL MEDIA ARTS: AN AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF THE TOWN CRIER

DES WILSON

1. Introduction

Traditional Media Arts are the arts employed in communication in rural as well as rural-urban settings. They essentially involve the techniques of message dissemination in the context of the fabled town crier in traditional settings. Ordinarily people do not seem to see anything of aesthetic value in traditional media arts considering the fact that they are already treated by the elite as part of a moribund culture which deserves, perhaps, a dignified rest. But the point has been made by no less an authority as Collin Cherry (1978) that no new mode of communication replaces an older one but rather some of the functions of the former can be taken over by the new mode. It would therefore not amount to begging the question if we restate the argument here that there are inherent aesthetic elements in traditional media arts. These elements can be identified in the various forms of traditional media presentation. Thus we can speak of the art or rhetoric of the traditional newsman's dressing, the art of his instruments of communication, the art of his elocution and the art of his movement or mobility. All in all, these add up to a nexus of aesthetic elements worthy of consideration in this context.

2. Content of Traditional Media

Traditional media messages are usually limited to a certain variety of content. In a study Wilson (1988) said that traditional media content includes the following broad categories, namely, Directive, Announcement, Advertising, Public Relations, News and General Information. Essentially the major thrust of such presentations is towards directives, announcements and news.
But in general, a more selective view of traditional media in its broadest sense indicates that its functions as circumscribed by the above categories are equally broad and varied. MacBride's (1981:14 - 15) report lists individual and group functions to include, information, socialization, motivation, debate and discussion, education, cultural promotion, entertainment, integration, promotion of group economic interest while DeVito (1978:454 - 462) writing in a larger com-

munication context extends these functions to include reinforcement, creation of ties of union, persuasion and attention focus on issues.

Taken in sum, the functions of the media in traditional society are in pursuance of the national programme of mobilization (activation), self-reliance, re-orientation, integration and economic recovery through the use of culture and various communication media and channels. (See <u>Culture and its Manifestations,</u> 1991:1).

This model seeks to promote the development of traditional arts and culture especially, its music, dance, drama, folklore, oral tradition and its arts and crafts among others. Yet the major differences between traditional media arts and modern media arts lie in some aspects of their stylistic variations. Two forms of news reportage are common: the past tense which presents an event which has already taken place and the future tense which announces or anticipates a forthcoming event.

On some occasions on-going events may be reported where for example, the turn-out of persons at a community directed activity is low. So here the tense would be present-continuous.

a. Past Structure: The village has decided that all households should pay a levy of ten naira each before Fionetok (Market) day.

b. Future Structure: All male adults should assemble by the Village shrine at sunrise.

c. Continuous Structure: It has been observed that at the cleaning exercise now going on, many families are absent. You are therefore advised to come out otherwise you would pay a fine of five naira for your absence.

But the general form of presentation in a 3 - item newscast is reflected in the following structure:

1. Headline --- Detail
2. Headline --- Detail
3. Headline --- Detail
4. Summary of Headlines with briefs

This structure reflects the nature, content and context of traditional news presentation as well as the traditional media instruments.

The traditional news story is first sourced and provided with a background,

and then follow a declaration of action to be taken or expected to be carried out, sanctions to be imposed on defaulters on community responsibilities, and reward to those who abide by the directives of the community leaders. The process is more fully discussed in the next section (See also the illustration of this process in Fig. 2 p. 31).

3. Traditional Media Arts: Principles and Practice

Traditional Media Arts present no special problems which could be said to be unique features exclusive to the practice. In popular mass communication literature, the audience of traditional media and channels is sometimes said to be homogeneous, a fallacy which arises from a conception of traditional society as a kind of unicellular grouping with identical tastes and interest. The audience may not be as heterogeneous as western mass media audience because members are not located in disparate places as Eket, Uyo, Ikot Ekpene in Akwa Ibom State or beyond the state, but they do not necessarily constitute a monolithic and inchoate group already synchronized and regulated like clocks, and whose attention is ready to be tapped and exploited by all and sundry. Wilson (1988: 210) has characterised the system which produces the arts as dynamic, multi-media, and multi-channel. He also avers that it is authoritative, credible, definitive, time-honoured, transactional, customary and ubiquitous, as well as integrative, low cost, non-alienating, adaptable and popular. But it must be admitted that its audience is relatively smaller than modern mass media audience even though the audience of the mass media cannot be determined by specifically fixing a size. It shares some of the characteristics of the mass media audience.

John Merrill (1971) has defined three basic subgroups of media audience. The nature of Nigeria's rural areas today makes it inevitable that these subgroups are equally reflected in them.

These subgroups are:

the illiterates, comprising about 60% of the total audience
the pragmatists (30%) and
the intellectuals (10%)

Fig: 1   Audience Types

Audience Type	Percentage of composition	Characteristics of Members	Media frequently employed	Composition
Illiterates	60%	Functional Attitudinal Passive Watchers	Television Film Radio Group Channels	Farmers Fishermen Traders Labourers Blue-collar workers
Pragmatists	30%	Active Doers Ambitious status-conscious Materialistic major focus of advertisers	Newspapers Magazines Books & they watch TV & go to the movies; professional or business groups	Bankers public-servants Private enterprise executives, middle class teachers (Pry & Sec)
Intellectuals	10%	Concerned with ideas, issues aesthetics and philosophy seek mental rather than material stimulation	Oriented towards print: books journals and specialized magazines and new technologies used for the advancement of knowledge; membership of acadamic societies	tertiary level teachers researchers, policy Makers

The other point which is relevant to a discussion of the traditional media audience is the issue of its geographical spread. As we have already noted, the target audience of traditional media messages is usually limited to the area of authority or jurisdiction of the village head. Each village has and operates its

own information - dissemination system almost sometimes in the manner of the community press, or in an unrelated system, like repeater or substations of a network service.

However, the principles of traditional media arts are based on the same aesthetic elements of audio presentation and sometimes of video or visual presentation. They embrace the aesthetic dimensions of sound, space, time, and motion including the quasi-aesthetic qualities of credibility, integrity, honesty, goodness, and mode of dressing of the news disseminator. The town crier employs sound through the aural elements of his voice, elocution, loudness, duration, pitch, stress and the smooth rhythmic succession of words, tempo or modulation of voice as reflected in the cadence of his presentation.

As he walks the pathways of his communication territory, he employs space as a parameter for determining the extent of his area of coverage. The village provides routes along which are habitations of the potential audience, as opposed to the actual receivers of the information. He does not go through every path to more distant parts of the village which may not be inaccessible communication-wise.

Time is also an element that is manipulated by the town crier in such a way that its value is appreciated. There are two main periods of the day during which the town crier 'broadcasts' his message to his audience. He does so either in the evening when most farmers, traders and other workers in the village are back from their daily activities or early in the morning when they are either getting up or trying to get ready for the day's work. At those hours there is very little environmental noise to interfere with the message. At such times the messages travel over longer distance than at other times. No town crier who wishes to be taken seriously operates outside those aesthetically relevant hours.

The town crier brings into the traditional communication situation other dimensions of culture which reflect the value orientations of the society. These include the ethical dimensions of credibility, integrity, sincerety, honesty and goodness embodied in the character of the newsman. His message would have no effect if the society has cause to doubt his credentials in these aspects. These characteristics are usually embodied in the town crier as he generates trust in the people. The town crier's problem arises only when he tries to grapple with concepts outside his linguistic experience. A modern day critic sees this as a weakness in his art.

In addition, the town crier, who does not dissemble, carries out his task usually in informal attires. Modes of dressing for certain occupations were mandatory in the past but he may simply tie his loin cloth or put on his shots with a tail shirt, T-shirt, singlet, cap (conical) and may wear slippers, sandals

or nothing. In other words, he is always simply dressed and informally too. The instrument of communication used by him is not dependent on his whims but on the traditional choice and nature of the message. Generally, he may appear as one who is not properly dressed for the task. This is not true because he reflects the general values of his society. The town crier employs certain techniques of message dissemination which are based on the aesthetic principles.

Thus the principal element in the process are: Attention/Message - Town Crier/Receivers bilocular structure which clearly shows the vector of traditional communication process. The feedback element is not mandatory but is built into the system for a greater effectiveness. It is a device that may be employed by whoever needs it as it functions immediately. Against the background of traditional aesthetic imperatives, that is, the employment of sound, space, time and with the possession by the town crier of credibility, sincerety, integrity, honesty and goodness, the process is made easier.

What emerges is a system which, although has some shortcomings, is largely built on trust and its operations are generally acceptable to its audience.

The gongman's (or town crier's) distinctively occupational apparel of the past has been replaced by a certain level of informality in dressing which roughly approximates the seeming lackadaisical approach to clothing by present day journalists outside the executive class. This vitiation of the traditional rhetorical concept whereby professionals were identified by their dressing is perhaps compensated for by the town crier's manipulation of sound through the use of his voice. He may sometimes modulate his voice from a sing-song, recitative monody when the news involves the death of a sage or eminent leader, or approach the oracular proclamation of an overlord. He may sometimes adopt the rhythm and poise of a humorist. All these bring into focus the immense possibilities of traditional media arts which, without the advantage of electronic sound effects, convey messages at a certain level of efficiency and fidelity.

Similarly his routine pacing of his communication territory is carried out in a manner suggestive of a built-in redundancy. In a village where houses are built on both sides of a major pathway, the forward movement of the town crier which leads him to the end of the village provides him and his audience the opportunity to have a repeat 'performance' of the message on his return trip. The system may have multiple feedback loops thus creating a sense of total impact in the receiver, an experience which is totally lacking in modern media processes.

This experience also underscores the fact that 'small is beautiful' where the current pervading tendency is towards 'bigness' or 'massness'. Smallness is more easily managed while bigness cannot be managed at the level the economy

of Nigeria is. The smaller the territory (village) the easier it is for the town crier to cover, within the aesthetically and tactically limiting time of the early morning and late evening, all nooks and cranies of his territory.

The Traditional Communication Process

The process of traditional communication is both simple and complex. Its simplicity lies essentially in the use of equallly simple tools and the assumption by the potential audience that the town crier is a faithful communicator who is most likely to give them the required information in matters affecting rural society. He is also perceived of as one whose message is simple and easily understood. His communication can be seen as complex because it involves more than one channel. The existence of other societies in rural communities creates a little noise in the overall system because of the potential for misperception among some members of the audience.

In spite of this, the traditional media process involves the employment of the following approach:

(a) Attention-directing device (ADD). This device calls attention to the expected message which soon follows. It is the employment of an instrument like idiophone (woodblock, gong) or membranophone (s k i n d r u m) , aerophone (flute, horn) or chordophone (string instruments) to invite, get or direct the attention of the audience to the town crier who attracts the listener's attention to himself. This is done in a manner similar to all broadcast stations' music or drum signals which herald news broadcast by the stations. It is sometimes difficult to ignore such signals even in modern settings where electronic audio instruments may equally compete for attention. This compulsive listening is as a result of the fact that the message may never be heard through any other media.

(b) The next step in the process is the actual call to attention which may in some circumstances take the form of an aural call to attention. Thus when the attention-directing device (ADD) is played, the town crier may follow this up with an aural proclamation to his audience to listen to the information or announcement he is about to give or make.
Mbook ekpan uton-o (Please listen everybody) Then the town crier continues with the striking of the ADD and repeats the call to attention.

(c) The message then follows. The structure of the message has already been discussed above but suffice it to state here that the format: Headline - Detail (3 item news) then summary may vary from community to commu-

nity. It is important to note that most of such reports are usually made of one news item which is often modified in details especially during the feedback (interaction with audience members) process.

Thus as we have alredy noted, the message component is really a three-part structure comprising the Message, Explanation (Details) and a Summary. The summary of the key items presented, represents a kind of news summary.

(d) The receivers represent most of the residents of the community, visitors, passers-by and those who originated the message. Internally they represent the potential (target) audience and their role is essentially to 'act' or 'react to' the message in the manner the traditional gatekeepers expect especially when it is a directive.

(e) Because of the collective nature of community decisions, the people are most likely to respond in similar manner to the message. Thus the Effect of the message on the community can be said to be almost instantaneous.

(f) Other elements within the process are the factors of noise and feedback. Noise in the traditional setting may refer to all those elements physical, psychological, linguistic and environmental which may make the processing of the message difficult. It also refers to those factors which distort the message at the level of the 'reporter', that is between the village council and the town crier, as well as problems arising from the ADD and the message distortion between the town crier and the audience. Noise from crying children, faggot-splitting, mortar pounding, birds, early risers music and motorists all contribute to distortions in individual households. Feedback is straight and often instantaneous. All receivers have the opportunity to seek more information. Such feedback can either be obtained directly from the town crier (this is the most frequent source of feedback) or a little later from some members of the village council. This aspect of the traditional communication process is what distinguishes it from the modern mass media.

Fig. 2 Traditional Communication Process

32
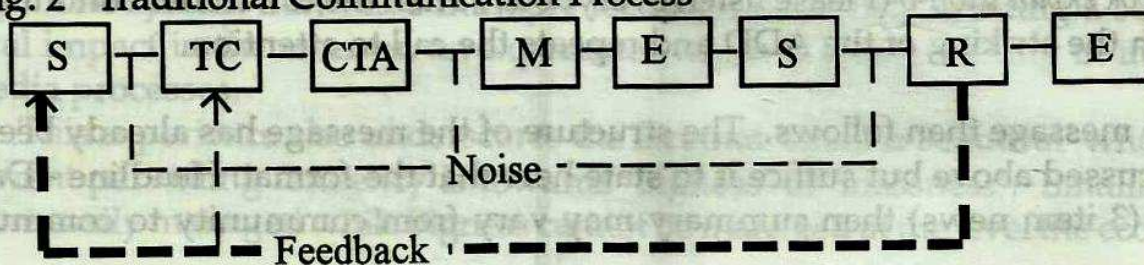
S   -   Source: Village head, other village council chiefs and Town Crier.

TC   -   Town Crier:

CTA   -   Town crier beats the drum, gong or any instrument that calls the people to attention, i.e. call to attention

M   -   Message: information, directive, action required, news

E   -   Elaboration of message

S   -   Summary of Message

R   -   Receivers: the village residents, visitors, passers-by

E   -   Effect: Action taken by R in response to MES.

Conclusion

It sometimes seems difficult for the undiscerning eye to understand that these factors operate within definitive laws of society which have their roots in the social (collective) unconscious.

Thus although traditional media arts may appear from a western model or perception to be lacking in aesthetics, the instruments, the practitioners and processes and skills involved in the realization of these arts have their own unique aesthetic elements that are manipulated for effect. Viewed from this perspective, we now have perhaps a basis for the assessment and appreciation of these arts from the purely intellectual standpoint of an academic sub-discipline. This could help reduce the further erosion and diminution of traditional cultural values.

REFERENCES

Cherry, Collin (1978) *World Communication:* Revised edition, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons,

DeVito, Joseph (1978) *Communicology:* An Introduction to the Study of Communication, N(Y) Harper and Row, Publishers

Federal Ministry of Information (Lagos) (1991) *Culture and Its Manifestations,* Know Nigeria Series 3

Gusfield, Joseph 1973 "Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change' in Amitai Etzioni and Eva Etioni - Italary (eds) *Social Change* New York: Basic Books Inc

MacBride, Sean (ed) 1981 *Many Voices, One World* Report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press/Unesco, 1981

Merrill John C. and Ralph L. Lowenstein (1971) *Media, Messages and Men: New Perspectives in Communication.* NY: David KcKay

Wilson, D. 1988 'A Survey of Traditional - Modern Communication Systems in Old Calabar (1846-1986)', An Unpublished PH.D Thesis, Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.