

Changing communication dynamics in Africa

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African people are often bitter about the fact that the cultures and worldviews of others have coloured their own outlooks and, in certain cases, claimed centre stage in their lives. This makes it difficult to articulate what people consider their authentic cultural values with the freedom and confidence they would like to enjoy. The following article identifies a certain nostalgia for a real or mythical golden age prior to the unequal encounters with cultural others that have reduced people to playing second fiddle even in matters of utmost concern to themselves and their communities.

In tune with this nostalgia, it is increasingly commonplace for Africans disillusioned with the disjuncture between availability and affordability in the global consumer culture to return to afrocentricity, to recreate that golden age when Africa was purportedly pure and its sociality uncontaminated by the merchants of sterile desire.

This article revisits mainstream expectations of communication in Africa, but it also clearly sees African communication and cultural values as dynamic and as constantly informed and reshaped by new encounters with competing and complementing ideas of culture and communication.

There used to be a time, so my parents said, so their parents said, going back through grandparents and great-grandparents.... There used to be a time when it was proper to dream, to hope and to yearn for a world united by a shared determination to enshrine human dignity. That was when to communicate was to reach out and celebrate difference, to appropriate the fascinating marvels of the creative diversity of our worlds. To communicate within the family and in the community was to imbue, to guide, to tend, to ensure, assure and reassure all and sundry that one person's child is only in the womb.

To communicate was to sow, nourish and tend the flower of conviviality and interdependence. It was to keep conflict in check, to harness creative energies in the service of humanity. To communicate was to take time to share, to listen, hear and be heard, to feel and to be felt, to see and to be seen. It was to be patient with our multiple voices, to create room for all races, genders, cultures, creeds and generations to rise and shine.

To communicate was to aspire to excel, to provide for individuals and communities to dream, to fulfil themselves, to offer the world the best in them. It was to shape and be shaped and reshaped through encounters with others, to guarantee continuity and to negotiate the turbulent excitement of change. To communicate was to be dynamic, flexible, accommodating, understanding, horizontal and unpretentious in our relationships. It was to be good, to make good, to persuade others to see, hold, feel, smell and cherish the radiance of the humanity in us and in them.

To communicate was to be respectful and respected. It was to be tasked with piecing together the jigsaws of life, gluing communities far and near. To communicate was to be social, simple. It was to keep hope alive in a world overburdened by ever compounding despair. That was what it meant to communicate, so my parents said, so I've told my own children, parents in waiting.

Invention and intermarriage

If necessity is the mother of invention, nowhere is this truer than in the sphere of communication. To engender, facilitate and enrich the creation and sharing of meaning, humanity has, through the ages, left no stone unturned in its inventiveness. Languages have proliferated, borrowing from one another, creating local and global variants, and blending to yield new forms of articulation. African communities have particularly excelled at this, 'creolising' inherited European languages through intercourse with African languages, and in turn enriching local languages through borrowings from European languages and/or the creoles.

Thanks to such continuous creative interaction, tinkering and appropriation, West and Central African communities for example, have been better able to communicate with one another through indigenised or domesticated English and French. In certain cases, so-called native speakers of European languages are completely lost when confronted with transformed variants of what they consider their mother tongues. The late Nigerian novelist, Amos Tutuola, was a master in the art of turning the English language upside-down and inside out, by writing an English that kept native speakers guessing most of the time. Everywhere the spoken word has also perfected its intermarriage with the unspoken through body language and other nonverbal forms. Translation and interpretation have become pillars of a global quest for interconnections of intelligibilities.

Technologies have proliferated with revolutionary speed, leaving even their greatest enthusiasts – the young and youthful – panting to keep pace with daily innovations. The advent of the Internet and cell phone have transformed communication remarkably. The bulk of ordinary Africans, who would otherwise stand little chance of ever making or receiving a phone call, are today served by the Internet and cell phone in fascinating ways. The fact that prices are dropping with every technological innovation has been particularly beneficial to African consumers of ICTs. And what is more, Africans are not allowing these technologies to dictate to them. Nor do they let the user cultures in the West dictate to them either.

Young men and women away from their home villages or abroad have seen in the Internet and cell phone a most appropriate way for keeping in touch, redistributing their earnings among family and friends, and keeping abreast with information and developments at home. Increasingly, they are investing in e-mail accounts and cell phones for friends and family in their countries and villages of origin, sometimes even when these relations are illiterate and can barely operate a computer or cell phone. Thanks to the cultural values of sociality and solidarity, even those who cannot operate or afford these technologies stand to benefit. In many situations, it suffices for a single individual to be connected to the Internet or to have a cell phone for whole groups and communities to harvest.

Interdependence and interconnectedness

In many an African country where resident telephone lines are grossly inadequate and defective, and where Internet connections are difficult and expensive, literate and illiterate people eager to stay in touch with relations, friends and opportunities within and abroad resort to the cell phone and/or flood the few Internet points with messages to be typed and emailed on their behalf. In some cases where connectivity is problematic, replies to emails are printed out, addressed and pigeonholed for clients by the operators who can only afford to check for mails twice a day because of exorbitant costs.

What is noteworthy, however, is that the high charges do not seem to temper the determination of those involved to stay in touch with the outside world. Through such connections, people are able to exchange news on family, projects, events and developments of a personal and general nature. They are also able to exchange news on different cultural products and to arrange on how to acquire the products for one another. The cell phone in particular is used creatively by poor urban dwellers to stay in touch with rural relatives and through them maintain communication with ancestors.

Most Internet users and cell phone owners in Africa thus tend to serve as points of presence for their communities, with others paying or simply passing through them to send and receive e-mails or make calls to relatives, friends and contacts within or outside the country. Thus, although Internet connectivity and cell phone ownership in Africa are lower compared to other regions, Africa's cultural values of sociality, interconnectedness, interdependence and conviviality make it possible for others to access ICTs and the opportunities these bring without necessarily being connected or owning the technologies themselves.

Thanks to such creative usage, these technologies are able to link individuals and communities in a myriad of ways and bring hope to others who would otherwise be dismissed as not belonging by global capitalism and its excessive emphasis on the autonomous individual consumer. Also, the very fluidity and flexibility of electronic communication made possible by the Internet and cell phone have facilitated the transfer of money and airtime, thus making poverty less of a constraint in cultures where personal success is frowned upon if not harnessed to provide for the less fortunate members of one's community.

It is increasingly the case that Africans living in the city or abroad collectively supply a free cell phone to someone in their home villages who they can call to give and receive messages from family and friends. Marriages, feasts, funerals, and village development initiatives can no longer pass any African by simply because they are in the city, abroad or in exile. The cell phone has become the long arm of village communities, capable of reaching even the most distant and reluctant 'sons and daughters of the soil' trapped in urban spaces with requests for the development of the home village.

The dramatic increase in the sales and theft of cell phones almost everywhere is an indication that this technology is welcome among Africans exploring ways of denying exclusion its smile of triumph. Cell phone companies and Internet providers are paradoxically laughing all the way to the bank, thanks to the creative appropriation of these handy technologies by Africans of all walks of life. Contrary to conventional wisdom in capitalist circles, sociality, interdependence and conviviality are not always obstacles to profitability. And thanks to these very same factors, Africans have refused to endorse the requiem for their ways of life.

Growing consumerism is the downside

The picture, however, is not all rosy. With every innovation has come opportunism. Thus, while Internet and cell phone providers are cashing in big time, rising are the number of Africans who see in these technologies a window of opportunity and opportunism to join the consumer bandwagon circling the globe. Few allow moral scruples to stand in the way of their drive to consume what they ordinarily cannot afford. Not only do families sacrifice to send their children abroad as labour zombies to seek consumer salvation, they use the Internet and cell phone to keep track of relatives and friends in Europe and North America, monitoring and compelling them to feed ever-growing consumer fantasies.

Under such sustained pressure, Africans abroad or in the city are always thinking of and sending remittances to relatives and friends back home, regardless of their personal circumstance. In many an African country, remittances far surpass what the state receives in foreign aid, or is able to provide its citizens and subjects. Cameroonians abroad, for example, are under enormous pressure from kin back home to succeed, with kin seeking consumer citizenship through them, as consumer zombies planted like pipelines into the refineries and reservoirs of consumer goodies. Families, friends or even casual acquaintances of those abroad, tolerate no excuses when they e-mail, telephone, beep, SMS or write a letter claiming delayed remittances and consumer goodies, or even when they simply demand assistance with this or that urgent project back home. They are often very impatient and rushed in their approach, with a business-like demeanour that leaves little room for being courteous.

It suffices for one to leave for the city or for abroad for people back home immediately to upgrade and classify him or her as rich, and then to begin flooding them with impossible demands. Changing cell phone number and email address is always an option, but only a soft one, given the ability of 'google.com', 'yahoo.com' and other search engines to minimize anonymity and

privacy, and given the growing versatility of the dependent and the opportunistic with these technologies.

However, while completely cutting off ties by changing phone numbers and addresses is an option (however soft), not many want to go down that route, however pushed. Instead, most develop coping strategies aimed at lightening the burdens of expectations from home, such as appealing to the humanity of kin and friends, discouraging opportunism and adventurism, stressing reciprocity in relations, attracting sympathy for their own personal predicaments, feigning poverty, and being frank about the hardships facing them.

A growing number of Africans in the city and abroad feel that relatives and friends back home must understand that long celebrated solidarity and conviviality are at risk, should they continue to sharpen their consumer greed with callous indifference to the humanity of kin. There is little evidence that such strategies are working, but those besieged are increasingly of the opinion that they will have to work in the interest of continued harmony and interconnectedness. In this and other predicaments, communication for human dignity is certainly the way forward.

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