COMMUNICATING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES TO POST-MODERN URBAN AUDIENCES THROUGH POPULAR ARTS[1]

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The reality of climate change is becoming self-evident with increasing population pressure in urban areas due to man's increased insensitivity to the environment with ever-mounting waste production that is hardly managed. The complexity and acuteness of this problem places a heavy burden on all conventional communication systems and operatives. Effective communication, which can lead to attitudinal change, becomes difficult in view of increased urbanisation and globalised audiences who have been caught up in a post-modern setting. How the popular arts within the communication sector can be used to overcome these intricate social complications and contradictions in the effective communication of environmental issues forms the bone of this paper.

The basic assumptions for this paper are that:

(a) Climatic change due to human insensitivity to his environment has become evident.

(b) Conventional information media have not been effective because of increased alienation of the urban populations.

(c) This failure arises from the globalised, post-modern nature of the urban audiences, which require new media arts approach to be effectively informed.

The Urban Environment

Drawing on UNESCO definition of the Environment, the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) Act, (Section 38) defines Environment as inclusive of "water, air, land and all plants

and human beings or animals living therein and the inter-relationships which exists among these or any of them."

While FEPA's definition is ecosystemic, UNESCO definition explicitly places these physical and social resources at a point in time and place, "for the satisfaction of human needs and aspirations." The environment is here defined as being in the service of man thus giving man a corresponding responsibility. *Blacks Law Dictionary* goes further to define Environment as –

> The totality of the physical, economic, cultural, **aesthetic and social circumstances and factors,** which surround and affect the desirability and value of property and which also affect the quality of people's lives. It means the surrounding conditions, influences or forces which **influence** or **modify life** (emphasis mine) (534).

In taking Cognisance of these definitions, Ogba U. Ndukwe concludes that:

> Physical environments control the physiological functioning of (the) human body, the choice of occupations, the consumption habits and all the systems of human behaviour-political, philosophical, religious and / or scientific (4).

The environment is therefore an ecosystemic three-pronged structure with physical, biological and social ramifications, in other words, life is an ecosystem, a global village where all (environmentalists and) residents should "think globally and act locally." And being dynamic, man can and should alter or 'culture' his environment to suit his needs, if man is indeed the centre of God's creation.

The social component of the environment is fashioned and controlled by man. Since man's policies, actions and behaviour directly impact the physical and biological environment, man therefore is the architect of his culture, which in broad terms has artistic, philosophical, economic and political dimensions.

The urban environment also includes the physical, which is the non-living-part of the environment, the biological environment, which includes man, other fauna and flora of all species, and the social environment. The components of these are man-made human systems which aim at mitigating the natural harshness of the physical and natural environment, if we agree with Darwin's survivalist theory of species.

The Nature of Urban Pollution

Legal scholars have agreed that pollution is not just the introduction of substances or energy into the environment. It is occasioned when such an action physically or potentially has a harmful effect on the "quality of human life, including effects on other animals and plants, industries (and) cultural and aesthetic assets" (Ndukwe 9).

Contaminants are identified as human excreta, expired air, dusts, pathogenic organisms, vapours, gases, industrial solvents, extreme temperatures, fertilizers, infra-red, ultra-violet and visible light, ionizing radiations, radio isotopes, noise, ultra high frequency sound and microwave electromagnetic radiations.

Poor sanitation habits and waste management are at the heart of urban environmental problems since it has been shown that the urban rich produce the highest quantity of waste. Waste paper and polythene bags are for instance a constant feature of our urban areas. All these have a direct effect on the soil and the water systems of the cities. The World Health Organisation (WHO) says proper sanitation is only available in 34 per cent of Africa; and, ground water pollution is rampant due to leakages of sewage, floods, fertilizer (nitrate) and waste, while many rivers are also polluted. All these portend startling consequences for urban dwellers (Panos 29).

In all of these environmental problems, the "hand of man" has been clearly identified as a causative agent in the build up of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere. These cause global warming with resultant negative effects on urban environments. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) beginning from its 2nd Assessment Report has continued to predict negative results such as:

(a) Heavier rainfall and floods in coastal areas;
(b) Drought in areas where average rainfall is less;
(c) Greatest warming on land, maximum warming in Arctic Regions in winter;
(d) Extreme weather conditions including storms, hurricanes etc.

These factors predispose cities and urban areas to more diseases (like malaria and diarrhoea), human migration and increased environmental refugees, hunger and famine due to failing crops and fisheries. The El-Nino phenomenon and Hurricane Katrina, etc. are no longer strange to us.

The River Niger, which waters five arid countries in West Africa is projected to lose 31 per cent of its water and in similar vein:

> Lagos (the 4th largest city) (is) projected by the UN to be swollen to more than 20 million people by 2015 as migrants from the drought-hit Sahel continue to flood to the Nigerian coast. Here, raw sewage is discharged into open gutters. Sea level rises and tropical storms and floods threaten to overwhelm an already unhealthy sanitary system (*Panos 18, 7&9)*.

Even if we leave these statistics to the experts, but we do not need a soothsayer to tell us that Armageddon is already here with us in Nigeria with recent experience such as rising coastal sea levels, floods even in the arid north, storms, desertification, exotic heat related diseases, acid rain, failing crops and rising cost of living,

erosion and landslides, collapsing buildings, etc.

So how does this scenario bother the communicator in the urban setting? The answer is two-pronged: there is a human dimension to this problem; and, the nature of the problem is the raw material which the communicator uses to enlighten, educate and may be entertain. So how does the communicator do his work in this peculiar post-modern problem?

Urban Information and Communication in the 21st Century

An anonymous quotation describes communication as "mankind's most important single act, when improperly performed, it turns friends into enemies and plunges nations into wars," Stan Le Roy Wilson defines communications as a-

> *Process* involving the sorting, selecting and *sharing* of symbols in such a way as to help a *receiver* elicit from his or her own mind a *meaning similar* to that contained in the mind of the communicator (emphasis mine) (14).

This definition comprehensively emphasizes the fact that communication is a *process* and a *sharing* (not sending) of *meaning* with a *receiver* who must indicate the reception of this meaning through an attitude. In other words there must be *feedback*.

For any effective communication therefore, all these aforementioned elements must be present. Communication is generally classified into intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and mass communication. The latter is effected through a technological device, often of an electronic nature, to large distant audiences at the same time. The process involves the source encoding a message using symbols, which are often words and pictures or verbal or non-verbal nature through a Channel to a Receiver.

The following needs emphasizing in view of the peculiar nature of our contemporary mass media systems.

(a) During a communication process, symbols must be drawn from a common pool of experience or frame of reference. It is important to note that no two persons share exactly the same experience.

(b) There are also non-verbal communication cues, which include facial expressions, gestures and body language which in theatrical terms can be dance, mime, pantomine as well as other forms of meta language embedded in every culture. These are sometimes culture specific.

(c) There must be a receiver and a feedback system, which means that every message must have a target audience whose experience the communicator must share. The feedback is an indicator of the effectiveness or otherwise of the message sent which determines whether further messages can be sent, modified or followed up. You may wish to compare these characteristics with your knowledge of our mass media or communication systems and practices in urban societies.

The Mass Media in Urban Setting

The various mass media available in the 21st century urban setting include the following

(a) Visual Media: Which include newspapers, books, pamphlets, magazines, direct mail, circulars, newsletters and billboards and e-newspapers.

(b) Audio-visual/Electronic: Media include Radio, Television, Records, Audiotapes, motion pictures, videotapes (VHS), Internet and electronic mail and multi-media.

(c) Popular Arts: Though not traditionally considered as mass media, the popular arts are also a dimension of today urban communication. These include popular theatre, community theatre, promenades, dance and carnivals etc. There are also traditional culture bound, non-verbal communication media of communication among indigenous urban communities.

Shortcomings of Conventional Mass Media: Communication scholars have identified various shortcomings the mass media face, which can also be referred to as channel noise. These channel distractions frustrate the efforts of mass communication. Traditionally, channel noises are extraneous interferences in the communication process. But the term is here enlarged to include all those peculiarities of urban communication that impede the flow of effective communication. These include:

(a) Physical (noise) interference due to poor communication system, equipment or natural noises. Digital divide due to technological advancement can become some form of physical channel interference.

(b) Semantic noise, which arises from poor encoding of messages and the use of language of communication.

(c) Psychological noise, which results from psychological defences which Wilson (12) calls selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention. This is a natural tendency in human beings to receive only information that reinforces their beliefs; hear and see only what they want to; and to remember only such information that reinforces their beliefs; respectively.

(d) Gatekeeper interference according to Austrian Psychologist Kurt Lewin refers to all those persons who are involved in guiding the "travels of information" from the source to the receiver. This includes information operatives, policy makers and managers of our mass media establishments. They decide what gets to the receiver, either by design or omission or defect.

(e) Agenda setting is closely related to the gatekeeper interference in the sense that the media consciously engineer, tailor and decide for you what is important, news worthy or worthy of public attention or discussion. If the media will not talk about the danger in George Bush Jnr's refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, and reduce carbon emission in the USA, nobody talks

about it.

(f) Domination of media by political leadership: The media especially public service media, which are kept alive with taxpayers' money, are usually dominated by the political leadership of the day. Nwosu (34) cites G.J. Idang who concluded after a research on Nigeria Press (media) behaviour that the media is dominated by leadership while newspaper editors and managers themselves are often tribalistic, corrupt, nepotistic and principally partisan. Similar findings have been made by many other scholars and media monitoring reports by the National Broadcasting Commission (Adeigbo 129, Kogah 13-18; *NBC News* 3.1; *NBC News* 5.2 and *NBC News* 5.3).

(g) External cultural invasion occasioned by globalization described as "capitalism in the age of electronics," is a "move towards a global economy where national borders cease to matter" (*Panos* 33, 1). The introduction of cable and satellite TV and convergence of mass communication systems in Internet Broadcasting has occasioned an information glut or overload. This overload results in alienation of the digitally illiterate as well as selective reception of mass media information by urban dwellers.

(h) Another shortcoming of conventional mass media is the presence of various statutory controls put in place by governments to serve as watchdog on the operations of the mass media. No media however operate without restrictions since there are a multiplicity of statutes, professional codes of ethics that are put in place by the NBC's Broadcasting Code, the Guild of Editors, Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria (BON), Independent Broadcasting Association of Nigeria (IBAN) and a whole lot of others. Apart from these, there are other legal controls which limit media practice like government regulations, court orders and injunctions, laws of libel, scandal and obscenity, etc. The Nigerian media under the military

dictatorships witnessed the invasion and erosion of media rights at an unprecedented scale (Umanah & Ukpaukure in Udofia 161-174).

(i) The EPS Cycle: Merill and Lowenstein have identified the progression of the mass media in society through what they term the Elitist-Popular-Specialised cycle. This cycle refers to the three stages through which most mass media cultures develop

> A mass communication medium usually starts out in the elite stage. Here the media appeal to, and are consumed by, the affluent leaders in the culture. After a nation breaks through the barriers of poverty and illiteracy, its media enter the popular stage and are enjoyed by the mass culture. Eventually, as the elements of higher education, affluence, leisure time and population growth colasce, the mass media begin to enter a third stage of the EPS cycle-specialisation (Wilson).

An understanding of the EPS cycle by communication planners and operatives directly determine the effectiveness of the communication media in any given environment. The true import of this tendency will be better illuminated in the next stage of our discourse on popular culture.

The questions that arise now are: At which stage of the EPS Cycle can Nigeria claim to be? Does our evolutionary stage agree with that of other nations who invade (with our willing permission and patronage) our ionospheric integrity with cable and satellite mass media messages? Is it possible for our urbanised city dwellers to truly imbibe the messages we "receive" from these cultural invaders? (knowing as we do what our broadcast system and operations model themselves after Western pop models)? To what extent does our communication operatives and experts consider

the cultural frame of reference of their urban or rural audiences? The questions are endless but it is in the light of these questions that the foregoing litany of limitations becomes significant. It is also in the light of these shortcomings of communication media that we proceed to our next proposition: our urbanised populations therefore need a culture based popular arts approach to information and communication practice in view of the post-modern nature of urban residents.

The Post-Modern Popular Arts Approach to Urban Information and Communication About Environmental Issues.

The guiding principle in the management of environmental resources including information management should be sustainable development. The Bruntland Report – "Our Common Future" defines sustainable development as:

> Economic development which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs (Ndukwe 12).

Therefore any meaningful information or communication system or media should enhance, in line with our earlier definition of environment, the aesthetics and quality of life. Developmental communication among contemporary urban audiences should be able to:

(a) Identify and target specific segmented audiences.
(b) Possess an inbuilt feedback capacity to gauge communication efficacy
(c) Should set the agenda for change without its gatekeeper limitation
(d) Address a post-modern urban audience, which is heterogeneous, multi-segmented and alienated, and
(e) Should empower the poor and future generations in line with

sustainable development outlook.

(f) The encoding and transmission process should be laced with entertainment to avoid information overload and glut, which usually will result in alienation and selective reception.

The communication approach that is most capable of achieving the above objectives is the popular arts approach; which takes us back to the EPS Cycle and popular culture.

The Post-Modern Popular Environment

From many indications, Nigeria like many other third world countries is still trying to extricate itself from the stranglehold of the elitist stage of media development. Mass media outfits are mainly government owned. An elitist few still largely own the independent media who prefer highbrow cultural forms to popular or folk culture. The country is yet to move into full people's democracy and industrialization. Our mass media have not entered the specialization stage hence the relative absence of specialized broadcast and print media, the likes of what our globalised elite few consume through Satellite and Cable Television and World Space Radio. Nigeria has not stepped into the information age in the popular participatory sense of the word.

According to Standford Mukasa, "Radio covers approximately 75 percent of Africa's population and Television 40 percent. The Internet's 0.1 percent how just shows marginal a medium it still is" (*Panos* 28, 2). By 1994, South Africa alone accounted for more than 48,000 of the 50,000 Internet hosts on the African Continent (ITU, 1997). So we consume what we cannot produce, or what was never produced with us in mind. Even with the development of the tele-communications sector in 2001 and a rise in total figure of lines from 1999's 450,000 to 40m in 2007. The 140m Nigerians are still short-served. We've only just come close to South Africa in tele-density (*Tell*, Oct 2007).

Coupled with the alienation of urban masses that arises from information glut and high levels of gatekeeper interference, Nigerian urban masses are still steeped in folk culture, which is characterized by, "street carnival, tavern drinking and singing and telling of folktales" (Wilson 6). Popular manifestations of this trend can be seen in the high patronage accorded crude and vulgar popular press and video home movies. This is an indication that we are moving into a popular stage where the yearning for a non-industrial past is still strong (Docker 133), a manifestation of our dilemma of being caught up in post-modernism. It is a cultural trend whereby art begins to assume an experimental dimension; aimed at rousing audiences from passive acceptance of old conventions and in the words of John Docker "restoring pastiche and collage and whimsy and pleasure and fund to aesthetics". Post-modernism seeks to use the methods of commercial art to "serve the purpose of civic and cultural enhancement" (97).

Given this post-modern backdrop therefore, what satisfies and is effective is not just the consumption of art or communication messages encoded by exotic specialised media in a mass digitally divided society but a more home-grown popular culture approach that takes into consideration peculiar crossbreeds of art forms between elitist and popular stages. For our postmodern and globalised audiences with increased loss of national identity and culture, the urban communicator requires a multi-media, multi-dimensional and more spontaneous presentation of information that cuts across space, time and age with a high dose of pristine fun and aesthetics.

Popular theatre and arts have these potentials that can change attitudes and engender local action without the limitations of conventional mass media.

Popular Arts/Culture

According to Roy Wilson (5), every society has its own popular culture. This culture is mass-produced and propagated through the mass media. We perceive this culture in commercially processed forms in pop music, carnivals and vaudeville, paperbacks, soap operas, video home movies etc. The mass media process these elite art expressions into popular arts for mass culture in our urban areas.

Popular arts date back to the evolution of the middle class in society: from the popular translation of the Bible by Martin Luther, through the new art of the novel where folk stories and romances became the transposition of oral culture, to the rise of the savage hero in the 18th century. Richard Courtney describes the latter as a movement towards Romanticism which had a strong attraction to t he wilderness, the outlaw and the antisocial outcast (14).

Popular arts or culture are therefore folk-driven not always by cheap commercial taste but the arts that take man back to pre-industrial days. The folks have also been drawn through economic imperatives into urban industrial areas, in an environment that is often "regimented, standardized and homogenized" (Wilson 29).

These urban folks have specific needs which only mass culture or arts can address: the need for art forms and information, to reduce their anxiety, solitude and alienation. The media especially radio and television have and can borrow from mass culture such forms like carnival or vaudeville which contain such entertainment as crude humour, dancing, clowning, juggling, singing and acrobatics. In theatre, the processional or promenade and vaudeville do offer positive release valves for urban masses as well as galvanizing – them towards desired action in environmental issues and problems where the performances are structured.

Popular arts have been criticised as debasing, consumerist and an encouragement of low culture and a cheapening of artistic standards (Wilson 36). But the understanding of popular arts in the context of this paper is in line with 'Biodun Jeyifo's definition of popular arts as folk arts that have evolved from among the people, being a peoples' spontaneous reconstruction of experience and

reality in the popular consciousness whose content reflects not a low inferior culture but a popular folk culture (3).

The basic characteristics of popular arts include the fact that the practice draws from popular reality; are designed for popular folks; contain high entertainment value, which can be infused with serious messages. In order to reach target audiences, sponsors, governments and agencies have successfully used popular theatre and arts to reach special populations during censuses, health promotions, and mass mobilizations and even to teach Christian creeds. It is, in Steve Abah's words – "the drama which makes uses of local materials and deals with the problems and aspirations of the common man" (Yerimah 87).

Whatever the attitude to mass culture or arts, it has been shown that "media cultures are closely entwined and what happens to one affects the other, because mass culture shapes mass media" (Wilson 38).

But effective information and communication must go beyond the mass media in view of their limitations and hegemonic controls, as attitudes cannot be easily changed through exposure to media messages. Des Wilson noticed this gap when he emphasizes that for any mass media communication to be effective.
"The broadcast media should be reinforced by word of mouth or by campaigns of personal intervention, literacy corps, health offices and agricultural extension" (Udofia 201).
This brings us to the community theatre medium and its intervention mechanics.

Community Theatre/Arts

Chris Nwamuo rightly notes that, "Community theatre is not necessarily a theatre in a local community but rather a theatre that aims at achieving developmental objectives within a community through the use of traditional media" (78). These traditional media include art, dance, demonstration, drama, festivals, exhibitions and song. A community is a "body of persons in the same locality, in a geographical location with distinguishable socio-cultural and economic characteristics" (Igwe 175). So community theatre is not necessarily a theatre for rural communities.

The method and practice of community theatre have evolved from Augusto Boal's experiment in Peru with mass literacy. His book *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Paolo Freire's book *Pedagogy in Process* have continued to serve as vital source books for practitioners. The fact that community theatre is a theatre that liberates the performance "from the dictate of the written word independent of literature, of creating its own dramatic text," according to Richard Schechner, makes community theatre a popular and post-modern art form, which can make up for the limitations of conventional mass media.

Community theatre identifies the needs of the community before any media intervention. It also makes the people a part of the conceptualization and planning. And then, the most important action, often neglected by governments and conventional mass media, is the follow up action, which includes action competency.

The methodology often used, variably though, in community theatre interventions involves the process of:

- Goal or problem identification
- Identification of Theatrical and Cultural Idiom
- Rehearsal, using the identified theatrical idiom
- The performance; and
- Follow up action.

Put differently, Saint E. T. Gbilekaa identifies the steps as including:
- Training the Participants,
- Community Research by the participants,
- Data Analysis by the facilitator and participants,
- Scenario formulation based on findings,
- Rehearsal, performance of the May,

- Post-performance evaluation and
- Follow-up Action (Hagher 27-35), which may include action competence.

Discussing the comparative advantage local traditional media have over conventional mass media, Tar Ahura gives an example of the market place as a folk-institution where people converge:

> Thus development information released to the market stands a chance of reaching far. If the information is released through folk songs, dance and music, in the market place, it stands a greater chance of spreading wider since folk entertainment has the advantage of sticking the information further on people's mind (Hagher 95-101).

The folk media therefore have a way of mobilizing the masses towards accepting the mass media messages, which should really be a follow-up to person-to-person folk media intervention.
Chris Nwamuo has ascribed the failure of such government popular programmes like Operation Feed the Nation, Ethical Revolution, War Against Indiscipline and MAMSER to the non-involvement of the community in the planning and implementation stages (Hagher 76). Various places where the community theatre has been used to successfully solve problems include Botswana with Laedza Batani Project, Chikwakwa Theatre in Zambia and others in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Lesotho and Bangladesh.

In Nigeria, community theatre has been used to improve specific community conditions in Benue State, Zaria and Jos and Cross River State. There is the Living Earth Nigeria Foundation (LENF), which has worked extensively through Community Theatre in Bayelsa, Rivers and Cross River States.

According to Dara Akala, LENF Programme Co-ordinator,

"Changes have taken place in the communities at

large as a result of the drama performances and some of these include: the introduction or enforcement of existing environmental conservation laws, less use of rivers and creeks for waste disposal, non-resort to violence in resolving disputes with the oil or dredging companies operating in the area, etc." (Arikpo et al Foreword).

The LENF Community Theatre Initiative has achieved other tremendous positive impacts in the various communities as they became better empowered and more action competent. Capitalising on the communities' oral tradition, there are also community radio programme, posters, calendars and formation of schools' conservation clubs as backup media. This author himself handled the delivery of the Cross River State Project spread over six rural communities.
Santos (*Living Earth News*, 8) has concluded from such empirical evidence that community drama and popular arts have and can change attitudes through the local action of the community.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it may not be out of place to suggest measures that can strengthen the delivery of information and communication skills in our post-modern urban areas, apart from the earlier stated communication goals:

- There is need for a more holistic planning of our urban environment to take care of other social dimensions, which may eventually impact on our communication system.
- There should be training and retraining of mass media operatives to get them to appreciate the real danger that environmental degradation poses. This can be done through seminars, workshops and conferences in the same manner the HIV/AIDS advocacy have been handled.

- Emphasis should be given more to developmental communication; which should also involve more audience research and segmentation for effective programming.
- The role of the mass media in agenda setting should be exploited more but with less interference by political leadership; with greater control of cultural invasion from exotic media through satellite, cable and Internet. The relationship between popular culture and mass media should also be positively exploited.
- The mass media should be encouraged to use more feedback techniques in their programming especially through actuality programmes, telethon and radiothon programmes, where audiences participate with little gatekeeper interference.

Above all, greater use should be made of folk or popular communication media, which are capable of real person-to-person communication, research, feedback and follow up. This can be achieved through the use of cultural workers who are non-governmental and community based.

Notes
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