The Role of Non-Verbal Language in Communal Conflicts: A Case of Bahomono Clan in Cross River State

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication holds a unique significance in African culture. The use of certain actions and symbols before and during communal conflicts to convey and communicate strong thoughts and messages dates back to ancient times. Communal conflicts which are rooted in age-old disputes constitute a major re-occurrence in Cross River state, especially in the central regions. The main aim of this essay is to carry out an in depth examination of certain activities, actions and symbolisms that indicate or convey messages of disagreements and conflicts unique to warring tribes in the Bahomono clan. The work will also look at the various roles nonverbal communication play in communal conflicts. Method for data collection will be basically carried out through oral interviews and observation. The theoretical frame, on which this work is benched, is the Semiotic theory of language. The expected outcome for this study will add to the existing knowledge of some cultural practices that exist in the Bahomono Clan of Cross River State.

Keywords: communal, nonverbal, communication, conflicts, language, culture

1.1 Introduction

The possession of language, perhaps more than any attribute distinguishes humans from other animals. The breadth and diversity of human thought and experience place great demands on language. This is because there always new things to say, new experiences to report and new challenges to confront. Language has to be creative, giving us the freedom to produce and understand new words and sentences, signs and symbols as the need arises. Language is primarily a means of conveying meaning from one person to another i.e. it is a means of communication. However, it does not exist

independent of culture. In other words, language is situated within a socio cultural setting or community. It is an integral part of culture, a reflection of many features of a given culture. Like culture itself, it is a learned behaviour, which can be facilitated or enhanced through direct or indirect context and acculturation. The inseparable nature of language from culture makes it of much significance to the various activities in the community. Wallace (1996), also notes that cultural context and intimacy with a culture will give a deeper meaning to the understanding of language and the circumstance in which it occurs will determine believability or sense of reality. This aligns with Oladipo`s (1995) view that the meaning of a linguistic expression cannot be established outside the context of the form of social interaction which shapes it.

One of the most striking things about human communication is the variety or means with which it is carried out. Humans do not only communicate with sounds but with symbols, signs and gestures. There are many symbol systems and non-verbal communication signs in Africa as there are cultural sub-groups. The use of these signs and symbols are intricately woven into the people culture. Communication operates through symbols and emotions rather than relying primarily on words or rational thought. The overall aim of non-verbal communication in communal conflicts is to convey strong feelings and complex messages without saying a word.

In its social role or function, language has the characteristics of a double edged sword especially in circumstances of crisis or conflict. The fact remains that "the misapplication of language", Orjime (2002: 56) observes, "is a sure way of bringing about disharmony and by extension, underdevelopment. When carefully and democratically used, language brings about co-operation; the misuse of it brings about confrontation". It is in view of the above notion that we attempt in this paper to document popular nonverbal communication gestures and symbolism, explore their meanings and understand how they could be employed to effectively instigate violence and equally used in the management and resolution of crisis situation in Bahomono communities in Abi Local Government of central Cross River State. The relationship between nonverbal cues, culture and communal crises would also form a major focus in this work

It is generally believed that the Bahomono (the people of Omono) speakers of Kohomono language, originated from "Akpa". A recent linguistics investigation by Ekpo (1998:5) reveals that the place "Akpa" (originally called Bakpa) was an area in the Benue valley and partly in Kogi State of Nigeria.

However, the name seems to have disappeared from the contemporary geography of Nigeria. Notwithstanding, there is a place or area in eastern part of Kogi or western Benue known as 'Apa'.

Oral tradition holds that due to inter-tribal wars, social and economic factors, there was a major south ward movement in the 16th century. Bakpa migrants moved from long distances before settling down at convenient spots usually by the river side or big streams. A large number succeeded in crossing the River Benue to settle along the opposite bank, others moved further south to settle along places in northern Cross River such as Ikom and Ogoja and as far as southern Cross River where the migrants mixed up to a great extent with the settlers there known as the Efiks. Some of those migrants that settled in the middle course of the state are known as the Bahomonos. This southward movement or migration is confirmed by Strides et al (1971) who concluded that the general pattern and direction of migration on the West Atlantic Coast was from North to South and East to West.

The Bahomono people are majorly farmers with cultivated farms in large groups of communal lands about one to six kilometers away from their residences. Very rarely do they farm near their residential areas. Their major produce are yams, and cassava. There are seven communities that make up this region, they include; Ebom, Ebijakara, Anon, Usumutong, Ediba,Afafanyi and Igonigoni. All of these communities speak one language known as Kohomono and share close cultural ties. The frequency, intensity and persistence to which communal crises happen among the Bahomono communities in Cross River State compel attention, hence the need to explore the mode of communication during communal crises.

1.2 Research questions

This study will be guided by the following questions;

1. What are the various symbolic signs used for non-verbal communication in Bahomono clan?
2. What roles does non-verbal communication play during communal conflicts and resolution?
3. What is the relation between nonverbal communication, culture and the language of the people?
4. What impact does nonverbal communication have in the transmission of messages during communal conflicts?

1.3 Literature Review

Africa as the source of humanity and civilization is not only unique in customs, tradition, and culture, but in its means of communication. Osho (2010:147) notes, that 'all the means of communication originated from the earliest Africans in the old Egypt. The civilization later spread to China, India, Greece and Rome'. The uniqueness of the African means of communication is embedded in their originality, creativity, tradition and culture of the people. These essentially make them highly effective and enduring in the dissemination of information personally, inter-personally and through group communications.

The African traditional media are the indigenous means of communication in the various countries of the second largest continent in the world. They reflect in the various talking drums, the folk songs, drama, festivals, town criers, traditional wears, the artifacts, art works, paintings, stories, and among others cultural architecture that reflects in the palaces, shrines, and African cities, towns and villages. But by the thought of Wilson (1999), Oramedia or traditional media 'are the local means of communication that remain what essentially sustain the information needs of the population which represents over 70 per cent of the national population in the rural areas'.

In many indigenous African communities, there is emphasis on nonverbal communication which acts a valued means of transmitting serious messages within the shortest time frames. Nonverbal communication (NVC) between people is communication through sending and receiving wordless cues. It involves the conscious and unconscious processes of encoding and decoding. Encoding is the act of generating information such as facial expressions, gestures and postures. Encoding utilizes signals which we may think is universal. Decoding is a process of interpreting information from received sensations given by the encoder. Culture plays an important role in nonverbal communication, and it is one aspect that gives this mode of communication its uniqueness, because it influences the roles and impact it has on the people. Nuances across different aspects of nonverbal language can be found in cultures all around the world. These differences can lead to miscommunication between two people of different cultures.Broadly speaking, they are two categories of nonverbal communication; nonverbal messages produced by the body and nonverbal messages produced by the broad setting (time, space and silence).

1.3.1 Conceptualizing communal conflict

Human life is characterized consistently with the events of war or threat of war, which of course is the outcome of unresolved issues. Violent conflict refers to the fact that the parties use lethal violence to gain control over some disputed and perceived indivisible resource such as a piece of land or local political power(Galtung 1965:348). The groups involved are non-state groups, meaning that neither actor controls the state and armed forces although state actors may be involved as an important supporting actor in communal conflicts.

Finally, the groups are organized along shared communal identity, meaning they are not a rebel group or militias but among people with a common history, culture or core values. Communal conflicts can take different forms, and in order to understand the different dynamics of communal conflict it is useful to analyze their underlying causes and the issue over the conflict was fought. Different conflict issues do necessitate different interventions and resolution strategies. Land is often at the heart of communal conflicts sometimes involving pastoralists and most times land owners or settlers. This kind of conflicts constitute one of the oldest forms of organized violence in the history of mankind (Butler and Gates 2010:1)

With the depressed of fishing occupation in recent times, bahomono people have turned to farming as a means of livelihood; therefore to reclaim or enlarge their farmlands has led to encroachment on their neighbour's farmlands and hence the protracted communal in the Bahomono nation. Some of these disagreements are age long and spanning for close to a hundred years (Austin 2015).

1.3.2 Relationship between nonverbal communication, culture and languages

Every ethnic group in Africa and Nigeria to be precise has developed complex and distinctive nonverbal communication devices which are also known as the traditional system of communication. The role of these devices in community affairs and its link to communal conflicts posits the existence of a very cultural heritage. African indigenous communication is a timeless practice that has been traced to the origin of human civilization, perhaps as early as 200, 000 BCE. Over the years some of these practices have increased and at the same diminished in some societies due to social and cultural changes due to influences from foreign cultures.

Members of each traditional society are generally familiar with the symbols and icons of war, conflicts, injunctions and even peace. Most times only inhabitants of such societies can interpret the messages and appreciate the significance of such symbolic and iconic forms. In addition to body gestures, many objects found in nature such as insects, trees, leafs, different animals and certain traditional instruments often relay or communicate far more than mere words can produce. Often only materials and objects found in the environment are used for nonverbal communication. These symbols or signs are not restricted to conflicts alone but are an intricate part of cultural activities such as marriages, funerals, worship and so on. There are various traditional forms of communication in different parts of Nigeria. Wilson (1987) had broadly categorized them into the following classes, namely:
(i) Idiophones
(ii) Membranophones
(iii) Aerophone
(iv) Symbolography
(v) Signals
(vi) Signs
(vii) Objectifics
(viii) Colour schemes
(ix) Music
(x) Extra-mundane communication
(xi) Symbolic display

Each symbol of communication is based on environmental, social cultural and religious activities which vary greatly from region to region. What is obtainable in one society may not be in another society. Inspite of their differences, indigenous nonverbal communication practices share certain common features especially in communal conflicts which always involve larger groups of people or the entire community. For example, the use of talking drum, protest of half or completely naked, certain war dances and chants by agile men communicates, dissatisfaction, disagreement, disgruntlement etc in any African society. Likewise, the pouring libation of water and alcohol; kolanuts or small amounts of favoured food communication communal bond between the participants, ancestors, God and lesser deities. The use of gun or gun powder in western Nigeria and most communities in Nigeria, sent to any community by another signifies war while salt or honey known to be symbols of peace. Trees being cut down around the palace of the traditional ruler of a conquered community in many societies are a sign of conquest.

Much of nonverbal communication activities are carried out in public, performed to warn (opposing community), appease, enforce or negotiate with the parties involved. Even though, a lot of people view most of these communication as 'primitive' comparing them to more advanced cultures and communication system, these practices have been passed down from one generation to generation for centuries.

1.4 Theoretical framework/ Methodology
The semiotic theory grew out of two separate traditions in the early 1900s: Semiology and Semiotic, proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure (a linguist in Switzerland, as an extension of psychology) and Charles Sanders Peirce (a philosopher in the United States, as an extension of logic) respectively. De Saussure and Peirce were the major pioneering scholars. Researcher like Noam Chomsky, Jean Bandrillard and others also contributed to the theory. Semiotics theory is the theory of the production and interpretation of meaning. Its basic principle is that meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which function as signs.

According to LittleJohn and Foss (2009, p.875) "Semiotic theory does not have a single disciplinary home; communication did not invent it and does not own it." they are also of the view that semiotic theory can be used to analyze any of the parts of the field of communication due to the reason that the fields are all based on the construction of meaning through messages and context. Semiotics therefore concerns with the ways human construct meaning for themselves and others. Furthermore, Signs are the building blocks of semiotics; everything else rests upon their analysis, and signs according to De Saussure (1969) are in duality – the signifier and the signified. To Saussure, the formal is a visible component, while the signified is an invisible component. In other words, signifier is to object, while signified is to meaning.

In the context of this study, signification and symbolism are inherent in the communicative methods employed in crisis situations in various communities. For instance, the use of palm leaves, egg, calabash and other traditional methods are symbolic and nonverbal, hence, the meaning is derived from the object and the context. In line with this, Hodge and Kress (1988: viii) is of the view that 'meaning is produced and reproduced under specific social conditions, through specific material, forms and agencies. The major means of data collection for this work was oral interviews with members of the Bahomono communities. Particular interest was focused members of the warring groups since it is the main concern of this work.

1.5 Data analysis

Several devices and means are used as devices to convey messages during communal conflicts in the Bahomono clan. The manner in which these nonverbal communications is carried out relays different meanings. The data analysis will be carried out following the classification of African communication system byWilson (1987).

1) Idiophones

These are self-sounding instruments or technical waves which produce sound without the addition or use of an intermediary medium. The sound or message emanates from the materials from which the instruments are made, and they could be shaken, scratched, struck, pricked (pulled) or pressed with the feet. In this group are gong, woodlock, wooden drum, bell and rattle.

The gong and wooden drum.These play very vital roles in time of conflict in Bahomono. It is not just hit or beaten casually beaten. When the drum is beaten once, the people are being warned of an impending danger, calling for alertness and attentiveness to the next instruction if necessary. The second time that the gong or drum is heard is an instruction that there is real danger and that the people should begin to gather at an agreed place of safety. At the third sound of the gong women, children and the elderly run to safety as fast as possible, while the agile men capable of fighting prepare for war and stand on guides for the protection and defence of the entire community.

2) Symbolography

This simply means symbolic writing or representation. They are used to convey a message which is understood within the context of a known social event and an accompanying verbal message. It is a descriptive representational device for conveying meaning. Symbols usually carry along with them connotative meanings which according to Rose (1962) require an interpreter who knows something about the system by virtue of which the symbol has meaning. This is the commonest form of nonverbal communication used in communal conflicts, they includes the use of palm fronds, water and coconut.

Palm fronds

This symbolizes several things depending on how it is used. During disagreements or conflicts among two communities, any party that sends delegates to drop palm fronds at the junction of the opposing community symbolizes and war. The palm frond serves as a warning and the beginning of serious conflicts that may eventually culminate to war if not handled properly. Nevertheless, the same palm frond when used by elderly delegates

to enter an opposing community, holding a palm in their hand, walking on a straight line in total silence around the village symbolizes the request for peace and settlement of any dispute on ground. Usually when these delegates enter the opposing community this way, they move straight to the palace/resident of the communal head or a town hall where negotiations can begin. At this instance, no matter the grievances on ground, the delegates cannot be attacked or touched. In situations where they are attacked, other neighboring communities gang and fight the attacking community.

Water

Water is very symbolic during communal crises not just in Bahomono clan, but the entire region of the upper cross. It symbolizes peace and it mostly used by the elderly women to pray and advocate for the end of ongoing crises in the region. Most time these women go in groups to stream with traditional calabashes, fetch water and sprinkle round the communities. What they are simply doing is sending the trouble or disputes out of their land. In some other cases, these women gather themselves at the village shrine during the heat of war, with water in earthen vessels and broken pieces of calabash. The water is poured on the earth while intercessions to the gods of the land are made with tears for the protection of their men in the forest warring. This group is mainly made up of very elderly women who have reached menopause or passed child bearing age. A good number of them are usually widows who have abstained from any form of sexual activity over a period of time.

Coconut

The use of coconut is also very symbolic among warring communities in Bahomono, it symbolizes the number of the opponents killed during a fight or war. Most times the fighting or attacks is carried out in the thick forest, thus when the men of the community return from such expedition, they file out in a single line with palm fronds on their lips for total silence. In most cases, the leader of the group is seen with coconuts; the number of the coconuts seen with symbolizes the number of human heads from the opposition party in their custody. In this situation even without saying a word the people in the community understand how gruesome the expedition went.

   3) **Signs**

Any meaningful marks or objects or symbols used to represent something are signs. They existed commonly used in time past during inter-tribal or ethnic wars or invasion to convey non-verbal messages. There are several signs shared by warriors of each community. These signs are often

codes shared by only those in that group. Sometimes during the heat of communal crises, several signs indicating arisen emergencies and casualties are used to inform members of the group only. Other vital information on the welfare of the warriors or the issue of limited arms is passed across through the use of signs. People who not part of the group will find it difficult decoding such signs. Some other times when the war is very fierce and a particular group is weak and has recorded a number of casualties, signs are given to the members of the group to retreat and take cover.

4) Objectifics
Media presented in concrete forms which may have significance for a specific society only, or may be universal through their traditional association with specific meanings. So many objects are seen as sacred especially in the context of conflicts. Certain animals and insects such as the lion, tiger and the leopard scorpion are used as objects of strength, power, fierceness etc. other objects include some sacred leaves like the Ekpe and plantain leaves as well as the tree stem. These are most times used as injunctions over a disputed area until negotiations over the property are concluded and the verdict given. Alligator pepper is also objectified as sacred and most times for certain rituals for the empowerment of the warriors before they go into the battle field.

5) Colour Schemes
The use of colours conveys different meanings. Among the prominent colours used to communicate different meanings are red, white, black, green, yellow, brown and turquoise. Of all these colours, red, white and black convey a universal meaning in the Nigerian society. In the Bahomono clan each community has a particular that their warriors tie on the head for easy identification in the war front. The colour ranges from black, red, white and other primary colours; they are often not made public for fear of sabotage and betrayal. Black, which is gotten from charcoal is also used by warriors all over their bodies and sometimes a mixture of white and red colours. This appearance simply shows that the warriors are ready for battle.

6) Symbolic Displays
These have the following attributes, smiling, sticking out the tongues, winking the eyes, expressions of anger, disgust, happiness and fear. All these convey meanings at different times and in different traditional environment in Nigeria. Very significantly, symbolic displays are common in Bahomono during communal conflicts. A major display involves the women

of the community who are disgruntled or in disputes. Most times they go half naked with scattered hair especially in the heat of war expressing sadness and their grievances over the conflicting situation surrounding the community. Sometimes these women march into the opposing community with their hair scattered requesting for the end of the crises.

1.6 Summary & Conclusion

Some of the classifications listed by Wilson (1981) were not discussed in this work, not because they do not exist or practiced among the Bahomono people but because they not very vital in conflict situations as it is the focus of this work. Today many studies point out that African communication has its own particular features, different from Western ones. A "traditional African communication" can be considered, according to Des Wilson, "as a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated by western culture or any other external influence as is the case in many parts of the world" (Wilson, 1987: 89). It means that, firstly, there are many dimensions that are typical of traditional communication (such as symbols, signs, colours, music and so on); secondly, there are different cultures that can find a space in traditional communication, avoiding the attempt to homogenise, typical of the Western mass media; finally, that "the traditional system is not competitive" (Bussotti 2015), since it belongs to the community. Communication is here a "common" asset that aims to include and not marginalise groups of individuals within society. Conflicts have been and will continue to be part of human existence, therefore it advised that instead of imposing communication systems that are foreign to the people and may require a lot of complexities, African nonverbal communication should be enahanced, studied and developed. This is very vital in grave cases of communal crises which most times it takes place impromptu with little or no time for verbal explanations.

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