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**ORACULAR DIVINATION AS A MODE OF EXISTENTIAL INFORMATION
GATHERING IN URHOBOLAND IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA**

AKPOMUVIE, Orhioghene Benedict

Delta State University, Sociology Department, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

bakpomuvie@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In this article, attitudinal problems associated with the acceptance and reliance on oracular divination as a vehicle for looking into the future for what life holds for the individuals and groups was discussed. Apart from stating the relevance of this source of information on the life-course, the article also addressed the threats posed to it by globalization, open hostility and gross misunderstanding of the practice. The research which was conducted in the twenty three (23) polities of Urhoboland, showed very significant patronage given to divination. It further showed that during crises, the people in the study area are compelled to seek the intervention of God and the cult of ancestors to identify the sources of the tension and restore order through divination. In addition, the Urhobo traditionalists are reluctant to engage in any human endeavor without seeking the face of God and the ancestors for guidance and intervention. The researcher however observed that as the research progressed, it became obvious that most eminent personalities, who participated in the study and patronized diviners, became wary of my presence for fear of knowing how they coped with life challenges. The study recommended that some aspects of divination should be incorporated into our tertiary school curriculum particularly in the (department of traditional medicine) as well as the registration of genuine practitioners by the Traditional Medicine Boards of each State of the federation.

INTRODUCTION

Most readers of this article no doubt, will question the relevance of African traditional communication systems in an era where information and communication technologies (ICTs) have bestride the communication sphere like a colossus. It therefore becomes questionable by the curious reader, why African traditional communication system that has been made obsolete and irrelevant by the ravages of cotemporary communication networks of (ICTs) be given attention (Ogwezzy, 2010; Ibagere, 2010).

Accepting this view will be both misleading and mistaken because culture has been defined in various ways by different schools of thought. One view sees culture as shared means of communication which makes it coterminous with the complete inventory plus means of deployment of any society's forms of communication; language along with all other sign vehicles and their interpretants (Kotta, (2002)& Andah,(1988). Another view is that which regards culture in terms of principles governing the functioning of a society's institutions – formal as well as informal and group as well as individual oriented. From the foregoing, it is clear that a people particularly the Africans can only be understood within the content and context of their culture irrespective of contemporary developments. Apart from contributing to the existing literature on African traditional communication system, this article further sheds light on the thorough understanding of (divination) in Urhoboland in Delta State Nigeria as well as the encouragement given to African studies.

Most Africans have lost touch with their past and can only begin now to take the first steps towards reestablishing contact. As Onwuejeogwu (1992) rightly observed, they must take a serious and genuine interest in African culture and societies; teach and accustom their children to their own traditions as well as the traditions of other cultures, so that by the end of this century, the new generation should start to have its first crop of excellent minds. This is why African studies should be taken seriously. The quality and character of the future African personality depends on how well these studies are able to bridge the cultural hiatus by effectively influencing the present elites and more specifically, their children who will become the Africans of tomorrow.

Andah (1988), noted that many Africans are shackled with the myth that modernity, progress or industrial growth are synonymous with what Western capitalist or Eastern socialist societies conceive of these. Not surprisingly, they have failed to take a hard and in-depth look at their own cultural adaptive systems and the subsystems to find out which of these can serve present needs.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

The way or ways a people live their lives, their complex of motivations, perceptions and sets which derive from their practices and institutions, are dependent on their beliefs and attitudes, i.e. "ethos", world view or ultimate cosmologies (Kanu, 2015 and Jones, 1972, cited in Andah, 1988). Jones further noted that every living thing is oriented in some ways to the world around it. However, only man cultivates a world view. It concerns how man perceives, manipulates and sometimes integrates his world, relying on his sensations, perceptions, memories and thoughts. With man's thinking ability as well as his power of speech, he has created oral tradition, created and manipulated symbols which direct thoughts, memories as well as distills abstractions. According to Robbins (2001), man not only makes symbols, he systematizes them as we shall see in African traditional communication system.

Olulade (1998) observed that African traditional communication system is a combination of practices and accepted social conventions that have been fused into veritable communication modes that have become standard practices of that society. It is a complicated and robust system of communication which flows through every aspect of small scale societies particularly in Africa. Mede (1998) and Denga (1998) noted the varied characteristics of African traditional

communication system; particularly its dynamism as well as being a multi-media and multi-channel system. It has been described as a potent and veritable tool of communication in rural communities among themselves and with others.

Doob (1966) contended that every human society has developed and established means of passing on information from one individual to the other. Apart from the dissemination of information, such as news and announcements, African traditional communication system entertains, persuades and serves as an avenue for social exchange. Ibagere (2010) defined African communication system as the system of communication put in place by Africans and is indigenous to them. He stressed that it satisfies the information, entertainment and development needs of the indigenes. Similarly, MacBride et al (1981) identified some specific functions of the African traditional communication system to include: socialization, education, information, motivation, entertainment as well as the promotion of the culture of the people. Ibagere (2010), further averred that the system is organized to protect the established norms and values of the society and in addition, it is a reflection of the 'ethos' and 'world view' of the people, thereby giving credence to the positions of Andah (1988); Jones (1972); Gladston (1972).

On the history of African traditional communication system, Osho (2011) observed that Africa is the cradle of civilization and is unique in its customs, tradition and culture as well as its means of communication. He contended that "all means of communication began as far back as Old Egyptian civilization in Africa, which later spread to China, India, Greece and Rome". Ibagere (2010) noted that it is impossible to establish when the African traditional communication system started but stressed that traditional African societies developed the system for the continuum of the society through the perpetuation of societal ideals. The attempt to trace the origin of the African traditional communication system is hampered by the dearth of materials due to poor and unreliable documentations. However it is pertinent to say that the system served the needs of the Africans at a time when technological application of modern system of communication was at its lowest ebb.

CHANNELS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

The traditional alluded to in this discourse, refers to cultural institutions, ceremonies, events and the arts of African forebears; observed, practiced and established by the receiving generations while channel is the link or ways by which ideas, messages, information, orders or fiats, instructions, revered secrets and symbolic movements are displayed, reached and contracted (See Ogwezzy, 2008). For Ibagere (2010), every communication activity uses a channel. It is through these channels that information gets to the receiver (Tosanwunmi, 1994). De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975), identified the space dimensions of the channels of communication.

Wang (1982) cited in Wang and Dissanayake (1984); Ibagere (2010); Hodder (1964), cited in Ugboajah (1980), Nwuachi (1983); Mowlana (1983); identified what they termed as venue and non-venue oriented communication media that involve interpersonal communication and operate at different levels in the society. These scholars noted that communication takes place at village meetings, markets, social gatherings, traditional ruler's palace, town criers or gong man, traditional priest and diviners, age-grades, visual channels, facial masks and tattoos/records, iconographic channels, poetry, chants and

incantations, signals and symbology, etc, roads, rivers and covens (projected meeting places of similar minds). Akpan (1977) identified some traditional channels of communication that serve specific, secret or sacred purposes and others that serve the interests of the generality of people. They include; bells, canon shots, drums, artifactual communication (shrines, juju assemblages), folk songs, dance, proverbs. Akpan (1977) further stressed that these channels of communication are commonly employed to advise, inform, warn, encourage, incite people on what, how, when and where to act. Though some channels appear to be obsolete, their uses still prevail today in Urhoboland.

The characteristics of African traditional communication system are similar to those of modern mass media with minor peculiarities. However, Ibagere (2010), succinctly summarized the characteristics of African traditional communication thus: they are open to all depending on the type of information to be passed, slow in contrast to modern mass communication, the channels serve large audiences, relative to the size of the community, enlarge events, transmission of cultural values from generation to generation, expose inadequacies in a society and so on.

A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE URHOBO OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA.

The people have in the past been indiscriminately called “subou”, “subo” “sooba”, “uzobo”, “Issobo” and “soba”. Each of these names is a corruption of “Urhobo” except “Uhobo” which is the Benin version. The Federal Government however, recognized the “Urhobo” in place of “sobo” in 1938 (Nigeria Gazette, 1938).

The Urhobo according to Aweto and Igben (2003), are united not only by ties of ethnicity and culture, but also by the salient geographical features of the territory they occupy as their homeland. In addition, Urhoboland is a deltaic plain, generally under 30 meters above main sea level, without prominent hills, arising above the general land surface. The climate is also uniform, being humid, subequatorial rainforest climate with a fairly marked seasonality in rainfall distribution.

It is disappointing to note that virtually all the rain forests of Urhoboland have been destroyed due largely to farming activities, illegal lumbering, oil exploration and failure to plant replacement trees as well as excessive use of firewood. However, fairly extensive swamp forests still exist, particularly south of Sapele and West of the road linking Sapele and Warri and the fringes of the Ethiope and Jamieson rivers.

According to Erivwo (2003), by “Urhobo nation”, is meant the entire Urhobo peoples who belong to the Edo-speaking peoples of the present Delta State and who are located in the Western Delta within longitude 50.30 and 60.25^E and between latitude 60 and 50.15^N and have as their neighbours, the Itsekiri, the Bini, the Ijo, the Isoko and the Ukwani. Erivwo also noted that they constitute a major “minority” group in Nigeria, being the 7th largest ethnic group in the country (i.e. one of the 400 language groups in Nigeria). On the other hand, Urhobo is a major ethnic group in Delta State.

As earlier stated, the Urhobo are Edo-speaking peoples, a linguistic classification; first used by Northcote Thomas in 1910 and which has stocked on with implications not only for social and cultural affinity, but also for problems of group origins and historical identify. Indeed, the studies made at that time and since then, have not cleared the doubts concerning the

chronological and historical details about either the plural society of Benin or any other Edo speaking peoples.

Finally, a historical account of the Urhobo has been hampered by the absence of archaeological and palynological works based on the excavation of those old socio-political and socio-economic sites recurrent in our oral tradition (Andah et al 1993 cited in Akpomuvie, 2011).

THE TRAJECTORY OF DIVINATION (EVWA OR EPHA) AS A MODE OF EXISTENTIAL INFORMATION IN URHOBOLAND

All societies go through times of crisis when the fragile social bonds seem about to break apart despite the power of rites of passage and rites of intensification to reinforce group solidarity (Womack, 1998). In Urhoboland, like every other communities, illness or natural disaster may threaten the ability of group members to interact with each other. At these times, (the onslaught of COVID-19, rape, kidnap, insurrection etc) it may become necessary to identify the source of tensions and restore order. Similarly, Urhobo traditionalists are reluctant or unwilling to start any undertaking without consulting God (Oghene). Before a betrothal, a marriage, before a child is born, at the birth of a child, at successive stages in a man's life, before a is appointed, before a chief is made, before a journey is made, in times of sickness, at any and all times, God (Oghene) is consulted for guidance and assurance.

Womack (1998) see divination as a process of gaining knowledge about the past, present or future by calling on the aid of spirits or by looking for supernatural signs. Divination is also used both for diagnosis of social conflict and for social control. Thus, divination is a kind of inquest as it is geared towards answering certain questions put forward, regarding the cause of certain events as well as what should be done to propitiate the gods or ancestors in order to mitigate an impending calamity which will occur (Ibagere, 2010). Today, people still practice divination as a vehicle for satisfying some of their communication needs. Mede (1998) conceptualized divination, as communication with the gods or ancestors who are believed to reveal information such as projection into the future to know what will happen. Mede (1998) further stressed that the informative, philosophical ideas and messages as well as predictions of those diviners, help in regulating the behaviour of communities and the people hold tenaciously to the diviner's predictions. When tragedy strikes an individual in a small group, it affects the life of everyone. Unexpected illnesses or deaths especially those of prominent members of the group, threaten the security of all. In a fragile economy in Urhobo land based on subsistence farming, drought or diseases affecting crop yield, can endanger everyone. Through divination, social tensions and anxiety over seemingly unpreventable disasters are deflected away from the group by attributing the danger to supernatural agents.

The Urhobo like other human societies are well aware of the material causes of disasters, but however, distinguish between "secondary" causation and "ultimate" causation. Among the Urhobo of Delta State, a person who committed suicide or died in an accident, was killed through witchcraft, the people are "telling you the ultimate cause of his or her death and not the secondary causes", such as depression, influence of drugs, over speeding, bad roads, or poor judgment, etc. Similarly, a girl who died during an illegal abortion and a man who died through stray bullets were killed by witchcraft which is the ultimate causation. The family may then call upon the diviner who

can determine the source of witchcraft by various means of divination. This researcher has witnessed very many of such divination sessions that has no place in this article.

Wallace (1966) observed that not all divination is directed towards restoring order in the group. That divination also facilitates the process of decision making particularly when a group is faced with two equally desirable choices, such as the choice of spouses, choice between two good job offers, deciding where to hunt, travelling and so on. The process of divination is one of the most essential religious practices among the Urhobo. It is an important element in sacred duties because the devotee is always eager to know the wishes of the divine, apart from the desire to be at peace with the spiritual powers on one hand and with his fellow man on the other hand. Nabofa (2005) also identified the component of bringing harmony between the mundane and the spiritual spheres of life. The Urhobo, he further noted, believed that it is through the process of divination that the devotee can determine the wishes of the spiritual forces which have powers over his fate.

However, in Urhoboland, the ambivalence of the community towards information options, offered by the diviners and churches, is widely recognized. Despite the tremendous socio-economic changes, a significant number of the people in Urhoboland still patronize the diviners for critical information concerning their past, present and the future. What is meant by collective ambivalence in this paper is the co-existence of widely varied points of views among individuals, groups and even professionals, either endorsing or outright rejection of divination in the interviews conducted. It was further observed that the relationship between divination and western practices particularly the churches and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), is one of open hostility and gross ignorance, each of the other.

The situation is further compounded by the attitudes of individuals, groups, politicians, leaders in the government, academics, etc, who patronize diviners in the shadows of darkness and in most cases, quietly at midnight when people cannot recognize their cars, who they are and where they are coming from. It is instructive that such persons will never disclose their identities for fear of stigmatization. It is obvious that such individuals cannot passionately espouse the course of divination and the practice.

The paraphernalia of divination include among others; the kola-nut made up of both male and female lobes, Opele in Yoruba land, bowl of water, which the diviner gazes into and derives messages and *evwaworepha* among the Urhobo, which is the focus of this study. This consists of sixteen half-shells of the “agbragha” or “agbrogodi” fruit and it is from this tree that “epha or evwa” derives its other name “agbragha”. It is worthy of note that before the Shells are taken for this purpose, special sacrifices of “emare” are offered to the tree to seek its blessing and approval. These shells are laced with a string, with each strand consisting of four shells. The total number of strands are usually four, making a total of sixteen shells in the whole paraphernalia (Owumi, 1996, and Nabofa, 2005).

Another instrument used with the “evwa or epha” is the “tusk” of a “bush pig” which is used by the diviner in tapping the four stringed instruments while making some un-intelligible statements which are regarded as oracular language. Owumi (1996) also stated that clients are also expected to make their complaints

though inaudible into the instrument. The oracle man holds the stringed instruments in pairs at a time and flings same on the floor. With the aid of the tusk of a pig, he taps the shells while speaking and conveying needed information from the spirit world. Clients are availed with the information received, occasioned by counsel from the diviner (figure 1 below)

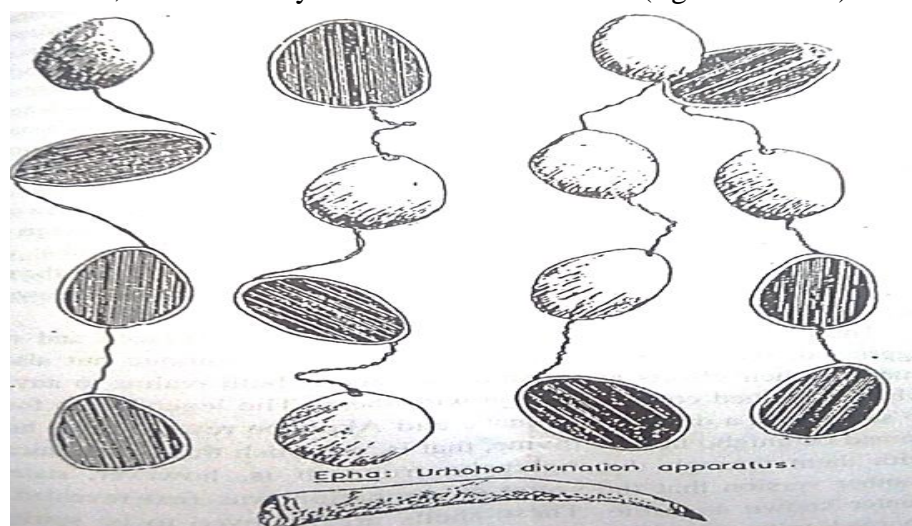


Figure 1: Uko or the tapper used to summon the attention of the spiritual forces behind the divination system

CONCLUSION

This paper brings to rest the argument for or against the relevance and study of African communication systems in this age of globalization, occasioned by the onslaught of modern Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). It offers a more concise and comprehensive overview of African communication systems and by extension, the understanding of the African peoples, particularly the Urhobo and their ways of life through the content and context of their cultures, irrespective of contemporary developments across the globe. The updates given to some existing information on African communication systems and the cultural milieu of the Urhobo, will no doubt provoke and rekindle serious and genuine interests in Africa cultures and societies by Africans, both at home and in Diaspora, who have lost touch with their past. There is an urgent need for archaeological and palynological works based on excavation of critical historical sites of Urhobo people often recurrent in their oral tradition to shed more light on the histories of the Urhobo. Similarly, the activities of quacks have eaten very deep into the art of divination in Urhoboland, thereby casting huge cloud of doubt on the efficacies of divination. Perhaps, the formation of an association of diviners and the registration of diviners in Urhoboland will suffice.

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