

Communication as a Tool for Promoting Cultural Festivals in Igboland

Chinwe Okpoko

*Department of Mass
Communication University of
Nigeria, Nsukka
chipat22@yahoo.com*

Abstract:

Festivals are common to all human societies. In Nigeria, numerous festivals are usually celebrated in different places at various seasons of the year depending on the nature and aim of such festivals. The aim of this paper is to identify the various cultural festivals in Igboland so as to showcase their values and/or relevance in today's society using the mass media of communication. This is especially so when we realize that communication is central to development. Accurate information is essential in order to mobilize, motivate and/or re-orient people to participate, organize and make informed decisions. The paper argues that the mass media is pivotal in the effort to project cultural festivals for development purposes, especially national development.

Introduction:

History reveals that communication has variously and continuously served as a tool for development. It is central to the overall development of the society. Communication is certainly crucial to man's effort to live a greater quality of life because it affects his productivity, his personal expression, social needs and aspirations. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that communication is inevitable in the social existence of man. It has been noted for its ability to promote people-oriented development programmes. This perspective which has become accepted by different authorities in mass communication, derives from the long-standing traditional role of mass media of communication as agents of change. People need to be informed, exposed to new ideas, and broadened horizontally. In this regard, communication plays an important role in development especially in conveying information and persuasive messages. (Lerner 1958). Indeed, world leaders have constantly turned to the communication media to seek for solutions to many societal problems

in areas such as resolution of conflicts, prevention and management of

natural and man-made disasters, improvement in health and agriculture, adoption of innovations, among others. Thus, Berlo in Wogu (2006) agreed that we communicate to influence a change. This can be achieved by encouraging and gingering people up to achieve the aims or goals of the society. According to Okunna (1999) –these goals are promoted by the media which then stimulate and foster the aspirations and activities of individuals and communities, to achieve such goals.

There is no gainsay therefore that communication media should be employed in developing countries like ours for the promotion of such development programmes as festivals. This is because, without mass media, no information on development can go further than the immediate environment. The mass media help to structure events and people's awareness of the world. This power of communication stems from two recent development: the growth of communication media and increased understanding of communication process. Instructively, communication affects the wishes of the society and their aspirations. It shapes how members of society perceive certain issues including festival as serious. Indeed, communication is part of and influences culture, it is therefore necessary that it should seek, influence, promote, boost and develop those areas of culture, including festivals that will aid overall national development. This is based on the implied relationship between communication media and the society. The mass media are invaluable in the preservation and modification of cultural heritage, values and norms, among others (Igben, 2006). It can be argued that there are no organized systematic utilization of mass media in the area of cultural festivals. However, little is heard from the media on the Argungu fishing festival of Kebbi State. The media can help to transform a local festival of a state to an international tourism festival. It must be remembered that Olympic Game started as a local festival and has now developed into a global fiesta. As trustees of the public and fourth estate of the realm, the mass media remain one of the best avenues through which awareness on the values of festivals can be disseminated (Popoola, 2005). These point to the fact that when properly understood and applied, the media can play positive roles in developing the festivals in Igboland.

It is in this regard that this article seeks to examine the ways by which the mass media of communication can promote cultural festivals in Igboland. It opines that festivals are valuable cultural heritage that can make positive impact and contribution(s) to the society for overall national development if properly packaged.

Theoretical Overview:

To place our discourse in proper perspective, we shall anchor this paper on the agenda setting theory, which maintains that the mass media can set agenda for the society by deciding what members of the society think about. According to McCombs and Shaw in Baran and Davis (2000) Audience learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of emphasis the mass media place upon it. In other words, the mass media determine the important issues. They create an agenda for thoughts and influence us in what seems important; they have the power to raise issues of public importance. This is in line with Lippman's assertion (in Ojobor, 2002) that the –media help to put pictures in our heads||. Closely related to the above is the agenda-building theory which assumes that –media can have profound impact on how a society (or nation or culture) determines what are its important concerns and therefore can mobilize its various institutions toward meeting them...|| (Baran and Davis, 2002). Thus agenda – setting theory aims at commanding the public's attention through quality/frequency of reporting, vividness of presentation and prominence given to the reports.

The foregoing, no doubt, underscores the communication factor in the effort to promote festivals in Igboland with view to showcasing their values for overall development.

Conceptual Issues:

This paper revolves around two key concepts namely: communication and festival. These key words need to be operationalized. It is hoped that by attempting a thorough definition of the concepts, the issues being addressed in this paper will become more explicit.

Communication:

Communication involves sharing and/or exchange of ideas, information, opinions, feelings or experiences between or among people. Jayeweera (1991) defines communication –as an interaction process through which persons or groups relate to each other and share information experiences and culture||. According to Opubor (1985) communication may involve:

Two people interacting in a face-to-face situation; one person telling folktales in the presence of a participating

*group; many people reading the thoughts of one person,
or hearing his voice over the radio.*

Communication from this point of view could be seen as social interaction by means of messages which are both human and technological (Mowlana and Wilson 1988). The type of communication being referred to here is known as mass communication. It is a type of communication in which information or messages are directed to a large, usually dispersed and heterogenous audience through a variety of channels called mass media.

Mass media include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, etc used in disseminating information and ideas to enormous number of people. According to Nwosu (1990) mass media refers to all technologically mediated, institutionally organized and spontaneously expressed forms of social communication in the rural and urban area and includes such forms as radio, television, newspapers, magazines as well as traditional communication modes like gongs, drums, festivals, rites and rituals. The fore going definition shows that mass communication also involves interpersonal or face-to-face communication. It also points to the fact that there can be no communication at the mass level without the mass media.

In this study therefore, communication shall mean creation and dissemination of information and ideas to enormous number of people using the mass media. Thus the word communication is synonymous with mass communication and mass media in the study. This paper examines how the mass media can help to promote festivals. Communication and mass media are used here interchangeably as we cannot discuss effectiveness of communication without the media.

Festival:

Festivals are special times of celebrations usually devoted to merry-making. According to Encyclopedia Americana (1993) festivals are days of celebration, usually in a communal manner of past or present events to which special significance is attached. A festival in the words of Amankulor (1985) may be purely secular like a sports festival or purely religious like the Easter festival. Any festival is social in nature and symbolizes the feeling of a whole community. Festivals are celebrated seasonally in many communities. Relations and neighbours travel to festival towns and/or places to celebrate with their kinsmen and friends. Festivals are occasions for relaxation and peaceful

co-existence among the people. Buying and selling increase among the people during such times (Okpoko and Okonkwo, 2004).

From the foregoing, it is seen that festival is a very significant form of communal activity. Through it, the life of the community is renewed, people are entertained and their tensions find outlet. It also involves exchange of gifts and visits. This explains why Amankulor (1985) notes that during a festival, society spends its energy and income towards providing the best entertainment in art and hospitality to its visitors. In other words, festivals promote and activate economic activities and social life in the host community.

Festival in Igboland:

In Igboland, numerous festivals are usually celebrated in different places at various seasons of the year. Popular among them are the masquerade and new yam festivals. Others are fishing festivals and other local festivals such as *Ekpe*, *Nwafor*, *Ikeji* etc.

New yam festival is called different names in different parts of Igboland. While majority call it *Iriji* festival, some call it *Iwa ji*, *Iro mmuo*, *Onwa isaa*, *Ime Njoku*, *Iku Mmanu* and *Ichu Unwu*(Ogbalu,1979). Almost every Igbo speaking community celebrate new yam festival, however, the period and mode of celebration sometime differ. Generally, it is celebrated between the months of August and October every year. It affords the community opportunity to jointly appreciate God for enabling them to harvest their crops alive, take a break from (hard)farm work and commemorate the departed members of their community(Ogbalu,1979).

Masquerade festivals are also celebrated in many parts of the Igboland and with varied names. Such names include *Uzoiyi* festival of Umuoji and Uke towns in Anambra State, *Omabe*, *Odo* and *Akatakpa* in Nsukka area of Enugu State and *Ikpikpo* in Ojoto own, Anambra state. In some communities, local festivals are celebrated but not without masquerade outing. Some of such popular festivals celebrated with masquerades are *Ekpe* in parts of Abia State, *Ikeji* in Arondizuogu, Imo State, *Nwafor* in Ogidi, *Imoawka* in Awka Anambra State, etc. These festivals feature different kinds of masquerades ranging from entertaining to fierce-looking ones, and several different performances (like eagle-masquerade laying egg) are displayed during the celebration. Furthermore, fishing festival is celebrated in some Igbo fishing areas. Among them is the *Ehoma* fishing festival of Afikpo, Ebonyi State celebrated between February and March.

One major characteristics of all these festivals is their ability to draw people (indigenes and non-indigenes) of all walks of life, from far and near to the place of celebration. Thus Okpoko (1990) commented that festivals draw spectators from distant lands during which participants share common concern. They share emotion and sentiments as well as merriment together. The local economy of the villages is usually stimulated during such occasions which are usually marked by spectacular displays (of masquerades dance groups) enjoyment of music, food and wine. Festivals serve as crowd pullers, and the dissemination of people's cultural heritages is one of the main functions of Igbo festivals.

The paper advocates for the modernization of these traditional festivals so as to harness their full potentials since many people, especially, fanatical Christians, do not opt for traditional things any longer. Modernization here should mean organizing these festivals at local, state or national government levels at officially approved venue(s) and on appointed date(s) in accordance with the directives of organizing officials/committees. This is unlike traditional festivals that take place in their original contexts (Okpoko, 1990). Okpoko further stated that modern festivals derive their significance not only from their ability to achieve the motives behind traditional ones, but from the awareness created among members of the society on the values and contributions of our rich cultural past. We stress here that the communication media should be employed to resuscitate and disseminate the value(s) of these festivals so as to get people informed and involved in them as well.

Communication as a Tool:

In any given society and at various times, communication play important functions and is known to exert an enormous influence. Great communication scholars have endeavoured to delineate these functions. According to Lasswell in Umechukwu (2000), the mass media perform three major functions namely, surveillance of the environment, correlation of parts of the environment (society), and transmission of social heritage. Charles Wright (in Umechukwu) adopted the Lasswellian functions but added one – entertainment – which he thought, was missing. The expansion in the functions of mass communication has continued and gives to the media a more embracing role in society. Quoting MacBride et al (1981) commission's report, the major functions of mass communication in society are as follows:

- *Information: The collection, storage processing and dissemination of news, data, pictures, facts and messages, opinions and comments...*
- *Socialization: The provision of a common form of knowledge... which fosters social cohesion and awareness;*
- *Motivation: The promotion of the immediate and ultimate aims of each society, and the stimulation of personal choices, and aspirations, the fostering of individual or community activities, geared to the pursuit of agreed aims;*
- *Debate and discussion; the provision and exchange of facts needed... to clarify differing viewpoints...;*
- *Education: the transmission of knowledge so as to foster intellectual development...;*
- *Cultural promotion: the dissemination of cultural and artistic products for the purpose of preserving the heritage of the past; the development of culture by widening the individual"s horizons;*
- *Entertainment:... for personal and collective recreation and enjoyment;*
- *Integration: the provision... of messages which [people] need in order to know and understand each other and to appreciate others" living conditions, viewpoints and aspirations.*

Okunna (1999) succinctly put it thus:

The information function of the mass media is all embracing and indispensable for the meaningful existence of members of the society. Through their various contents the mass media collect, store, process and disseminate news, data, pictures, facts, messages, opinions and comments which members of the public require in order to react knowledgeably to personal, environmental, national and international conditions, as well as to be in a position to take appropriate decisions.

Through information function , the mass media is able to accomplish all other communication functions, such as socialization, motivation, education etc.

The mass media in performing socialization function works closely with other socializing agencies like the family, the school, the church and the peer group to make individuals aware and internalize acceptable behaviour patterns, which enable them operate as effective members of their society (Okunna 1999). By this, they can bring about the resuscitation of some of –collapsed || festivals in their society. It is worthy to note that these functions are very much interrelated and that the performance of one function has implications for the other.

It is obvious that for people to take appropriate and timely decisions on developmental programmes and react to them rationally, they need adequate and accurate information about them. Also, information needed to stimulate action towards changes can be disseminated most effectively, quickly and widely through the mass media. The mass media of communication therefore are a *sine qua non* in the promotion of social cultural events. Wilbur Schramm (1964) succinctly put it thus:

The populace must have information about national development; their attention must be focused in the need for change, the opportunities inviting change, the methods and means of change; and if possible, their aspirations for themselves and their country must be raised.

Information, therefore, is a vital function of communication which enlightens the people and awakens their interests for change in their environment. Through the mass media, people get almost all the relevant information that shape their personality in relation to the society and also shape their perceptions of issues in the society and even adequate information on how to react to such issues. For instance, if the Igbo and her government are well informed, through various communication channels about the values and importance of festivals and the need for their continued existence and celebration, there is the tendency that the people will react positively to the message. Therefore, adequate information will make people aware of how to contribute their quota to the promotion of festivals.

The mass media through good (broadcast) programmes and featurized development news reports, could encourage and ginger people to appreciate and be involved in festival promotion. They also educate people on the values of festivals to themselves and to the community. By so doing, the media become object of motivation and education, which stimulate action and educate people, on the need to

appreciate and practice their culture. They are also employed in persuading the authorities to make policy that will promote and sustain festivals in their location.

Because the media raise issues and create awareness on various topics, they are able to bring to the fore the need for continuing sustenance and appreciation of various aspects of our culture such as festivals. The mass media not only promote our culture but also encourage appreciation of others' culture through its integration function. For example through festivals, different aspects of a cultural system are exposed to other cultures, leading to greater understanding and appreciation of their differences and commonalities. At this, cross-cultural fertilization takes place, the society and mankind in general become better off (Ebeze 2002). This means that festivals can bring about national unity.

As a function of entertainment, the mass media can, through festivals –provide diversion and escape from the harsh realities of life, offer relief from the medium of day-to-day existence and lessen the stress and strain emanating from a rapidly – changing world||. (Okunna 1999). They provide some diversion and amusement, relaxation and respite.

To this end, the role of communication in promoting festivals is enormous. Through communication, awareness is created, issues are interpreted and people's interest are awakened towards appreciating, participating and promoting festivals in their communities. This is in line with the agenda-setting theory, wherein the media create in the minds of the people issues that should be viewed as priority issues – such as festivals development.

It is therefore recommended that media practitioners and policy makers should harness these media potential to achieve desired results. It is proposed that a team of experts comprising communication and cultural experts, entertainment professionals and event planners be organized to identify Igbo festivals that could be harnessed and promoted for development. Since masquerades cut across all festivals in Igboland, festivals like *Irijii*, *Ikeji*, *Ekpe*, *Nwafor*, *Odo*, etc should be studied, synchronized and promoted as a mega Igbo cultural festival. The various features which make them individually and/or collectively attractive to visitors should be promoted. The venue, period of celebration and other features that will make the festival worthwhile should be agreed upon by the constituent groups.

Having done the above, the communication expert(s) would ensure that appropriate media of communication are employed to

attract the desired audience. This could be done both locally and internationally using programmes like documentary, Public Service Announcement, interview, featurized reports, bill board and e-marketing.

Conclusion:

We may not have exhausted all the ways by which communication media can help to promote festivals in our society, but we have succeeded in bringing to notice, the fact that festival promotion is part of communication function in the society. We have also tried to highlight the values of festival with the aim of making people appreciate them. This becomes necessary because people protect whatever they like and so will be motivated to attend cultural carnivals and fiesta, protect cultural resources within their domains while encouraging its use for development purposes.

These values may not be harnessed if they are not communicated to the right public/audience. The above explains why this study becomes apt. The paper argues that festivals in Igboland can be promoted using communication as a tool. It identifies some festivals that attract visitors to Igboland and points out that some of these could be harnessed for development purposes using appropriate media of communication. The radio, television, newspaper, magazine, etc. are invaluable in this regard. It is suggested that government should take the lead in promotional campaigns for festivals using such media as television, radio, newspapers, pamphlets, internet and other trade items. Such promotional campaigns should be subject to periodic review to take care of new developments. Furthermore, media practitioners should embark on more research on their part and work out appropriate strategies to ensure that this aspect of our culture is promoted and imbibed.

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