What My Grandmother Taught Me About Communication: Perspectives from African Cultural Values

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Abstract
In this essay, the author examines the roots of African patrimony and its relevance in developing and implementing an Afrocentric theory of communication, culture and social change.

Résumé
Dans cet essai, l’auteur se penche sur les racines du patrimoine africain, et le rôle important que jouerait ce dernier dans la mise au point et l’application d’une théorie afro centriste de communication, de culture et de changements sociaux.

Introduction: The African imperative
Since the human being is ‘the communicating animal’, all human societies are endowed with a legacy of communication theory and practice. And because communication is the social mechanism for building society, all communication is rule-governed, providing the basis for expectations and predictions of what others will say and do. The rules of communication-in-society also provide a basis for evaluating what is correct or right or good, i.e., for making ethical and moral judgements about communication practice and communication acts.

The underlying basis for such judgements, i.e. the underlying ‘theory’ is often dormant, unexpressed, and yet very much active in regulating the behaviour of individuals and groups. Cultures outside Africa have developed, codified and articulated these underlying ideas, based on the

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experience of their societies over the centuries, and are therefore able now to propose them as organised bodies of thought, through appropriate meta-languages. In matters of communication, Africans have a fundamental right, and a responsibility, to make the wisdom of their ancestors known, accepted and adopted.

What is the African patrimony in this area?

**What my grandmother taught me**

More than twenty years ago, I was invited by a group of media professionals to give a talk in Benin City. I flew up from Lagos, and first stopped at the family house to see my mother. My grandmother was also there. I spoke to them briefly and went on to give my lecture. Among other ideas, I spoke about freedom of expression and the ethics of journalism.

Mission accomplished, I returned to the family to spend the night. As always, my grandmother was curious about what I did for a living. She had got used to the idea that although I was referred to as ‘Doctor’, I couldn’t do a thing about her cough, since I was only a doctor of books! But exactly what did I do?

I started to tell her about the talk I had just given that afternoon. I was doing quite well in my explanation. I explained about freedom of speech, and how everyone should be allowed to say what was on their mind, in the interest of the family and community, and reminded her, that she, and our elders often said: ‘Ron ofo e tse udaju’, meaning, ‘speaking the truth should not be regarded as insolence’, a way of encouraging the young to speak fearlessly without the usual reserve that their blunt speech might offend elders. Then as I tried to explain ethics, and professionalism in journalism, I found myself stammering; the words did not flow so readily; I could not quite find the expressions in my mother tongue to clearly explain what I had said earlier that day in English, with considerable eloquence. I spoke about truth-telling, about bribery and the need to be good and honest. My grandmother listened intently and greeted me warmly, invoking my praise names and those of my paternal and maternal forebears, thanking them for sparing her life so she could witness my progress and success.

But that encounter set me thinking. The next time I had a chance to see my grandmother again, I had some questions for her; and I got some answers. I have been ruminating over them for a long time.

I share them with you now, because I consider that African communication scholars and practitioners need to be inspired by the wisdom of our ancestors, especially our grandmothers, mothers and aunts, as we seek to anchor our discipline in those cultural foundations that will provide
the validity and efficacy that we must produce in our focus on communication for social change, including communication to sustain a culture of peace in Africa.

African communication ethics?
What follows is an attempt to sketch an approach to discussing communication and media ethics through looking at the meta-language of a few African cultures. First, the intention is to see whether these African cultures distinguish different types of communication events and products, and how and whether such differentiation provides unique perspectives on communication practice, in terms of ethical considerations.

Second, I will attempt to draw implications from the findings for the international discourse on media ethics, and especially for training of communicators and the development of communication policies in Africa that would help promote a culture of peace and social change.

What is truth?
When I asked my grandmother: ‘Nene, what is ‘truth’?”, she burst forth into a song, by way of response, as often elderly women in our cultures do. The following folk song (translated) in Itsekiri, my mother tongue, spoken by a minority ethnic group in the Niger Delta area of southern Nigeria, is her answer:

    That which I have seen, that is what I say;
    I will not say it with fear.
    That which I have seen, that is what I say;
    I will not say it with fear.
    When a piece of yam is planted in the ground,
    The rains come, the season comes; and it grows;
    When a human being is planted in the ground,
    The rains come, the season comes; and he doesn’t grow.
    That which I have seen, that is what I say;
    I will not say it with fear.

According to this song, certain facts and events are incontrovertible. Everyone agrees with statements about these facts, because everyone has experienced them. You can plant seeds or cuttings and expect them to grow, and to harvest the fruits; but human corpses ‘planted’ in the earth do not grow; they just rot away.

Therefore statements, based on experienced (or ‘lived’) and verifiable facts, are accepted as true. In this sense, truth is based on inter-subjective validation. It is therefore not normally subject to controversy and refutation.
Furthermore, such truth is the product of the community, rather than the individual. The Itsekiri word for ‘truth’ is ‘oron fo’, which means ‘good word’, or ‘genuine word’. Truth has a value dimension; it is good and reliable. Therefore it is desirable. The song says ‘I will say what I know without fear’; in other words, since what I know is an incontrovertible fact, and everyone can attest to that, I have the courage to proclaim it without fear that it would be refuted, or that it would cause offence.

The Itsekiri idea of truth finds an echo in other languages of Nigeria. Among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, truth is ‘otito’, which etymologically comes from ‘oro t’o to’, which means ‘straight word’; straight in the way that an arrow, or a spear is straight, direct, not crooked. In Igbo, the majority language of the southeast of the country, ‘ezi okwu’, which is the expression for ‘truth’ means literally ‘a good or real word.’ Opata (1998) has dealt extensively with this in his essay, “Truth in Igbo Thought and Life”.

In all three languages, Igbo, Itsekiri and Yoruba, truth is seen as representing genuineness and goodness.

What is news?
The Itsekiri recognise ‘iyen’, as a report of an event by someone else. The hearer did not witness or experience the event; and the teller may or may not have witnessed or experienced it. But the point of view for defining something as ‘iyen’, is the receiver’s viewpoint; ‘someone told me.’

It is not expected that ‘iyen’ would be necessarily true. All that seems important is that the hearer takes no responsibility for its veracity. He can relay it to others, so long as he identifies it as something he heard from someone else, not something that he himself is originating. The subject matter of ‘iyen’ is usually factual, rather than fictitious. It can relate to a person, or a situation.

In terms of believability, ‘irohin’, news, among the Yoruba, is rated less than ‘af’ojuba’, that is ‘what was seen with (one’s own) eyes’. So while we say in English, ‘seeing is believing’, the Yoruba say ‘being told is not as valuable as witnessing’; in other words, an eyewitness personal experience is more believable than a reported account, presumably, because it is more true.

Opata (1998) refers to a similar point of view, in the validation of truth among the Igbo:

Because truth is seen as ‘ihe mere eme’, testimony is one way that the Igbo validate the truth of statements. Thus the Igbo prioritize ‘seeing’ to
‘hearing’, as in the Igbo proverb: ‘afuru n’anya ka anuru na-nti’; meaning: ‘what I witnessed with my eyes is greater than what I heard with my ears.’

Thus in deciding on the truth of statements, especially in cases of conflict resolution, the Igbo depend a lot on oral testimony from those who witnessed the event first hand.

**Itsekiri faction: ‘ita’**

Folklore is an important area of Itsekiri oral tradition and cultural expression, as it is for many traditional or transitional societies, especially those still with significant proportions of illiterates. Folk tales, myths, and legends are categories of the oral tradition that are regarded as ‘ita’. They differ from ‘iyen’, news, by not being true or factual in the literal sense. They are accepted as things that may have happened, or that may have been possible, in the dim, distant past, or as things which were handed down from parents and ancestors; therefore, while not literally true, they are culturally acceptable, even as fiction, meaning they never existed, and may have been made up.

‘Ita’ may be told about human beings, sometimes identified with names that symbolise a significant aspect of their character, (Ajogri ‘one who burns quickly, like a raging fire’, meaning a hot-tempered person), or about human beings from legendary history, whose names are well known, though not usually from the living memory of anyone alive at the telling.

Berry (1960) makes a distinction between fictional and non-fictional narrative. Explaining, he says:

‘Under the latter heading I would subsume what has been variously considered as myths, legends and chronicles. They are distinguished from tales proper, that is, from fictional narrative, by the fact that they are regarded in context as true. Ethnographically at least, they are history. Myths, chiefly stories of the deities and the origins of natural phenomena, are especially important throughout West Africa...’ Berry also speaks about ‘Legends which recount the origins of families and clans and explain the ritual and taboos of the ancestral code...told only for instruction within the group, and rarely to outsiders...’

What seems to be important for ‘ita’, is their moral validity, based on the moral lesson they are expected to teach. Therefore at the end of every ‘ita’, there is usually a didactic formulaic statement: ‘that is why our people say that... (it does not pay to be greedy). In such versions, ‘ita’ belongs to Berry’s ‘fictional’ category, which includes ‘serious explanatory and moralizing tales, humorous trickster, and tales developed wholly or essentially in human society’. We may also call them ‘editorialising’ stories.
‘Ita’, like ‘pure fiction’ tales, usually take place in the animal kingdom, involving folkloric characters, e.g. the tortoise, who in Itsekiri tales is the protagonist/trickster. (The equivalents are ‘ijapa’, the tortoise, among the Yoruba, ‘mbeku’, the tortoise also, among the Igbo, ‘kere’, the dog, among the Hausa, or ‘anansi’, the spider, among the Akan of Ghana.)

This brief excursion into various forms of discourse helps to provide the cultural canvas against which it is possible to make valid distinctions among genres that are considered real and those for which fiction is a more appropriate label.

Truth and accuracy
Questions of truth do not concern ‘ita’; though there might be challenges about accuracy in transmission of a well-known story. The teller may have a limited repertoire, and may tend to forget the main characters in a story, or may forget the sequence of events or story line; or he may forget the punch line or moral at the end of the story.

Since ‘ita’ is ‘performed’ ‘live’, or face-to-face, the audience would interject with corrections, or someone might offer to retell the story, providing what they consider the ‘correct’ version.

Here accuracy is a function either of what is remembered, or how it compares with what others who are present remember, or of what version each person was exposed to. The arguments that arise are therefore not of an ethical or moral nature; true they have to do with ‘fidelity’; but it is ‘fidelity of recollection’, rather than ‘fidelity to reality.’

But even here, the teller of the story is allowed, even expected, to deviate from the ‘original’ tale as he was told it, imposing his own verbal virtuosity and creativity in the telling; so long as such deviation does not destroy the essential elements and moral vision of the story. Different story-tellers are evaluated according to their verbal skills in relating stories that everyone may know. In the retelling, parts of the story may be dramatised, or ‘illustrated’, or, even ‘performed’, with music, dance and costumes, in the manner of what Ezeokoli (1974) has called ‘story theatre’.

Sources in/of communication
We have already seen that ‘iyen’, news, is the report of an event. The receiver is not required to identify who told him the ‘iyen’; but he could choose to do so, especially in cases where the veracity of the source is challenged. Someone may ask: ‘Who reported this news to you?’ To which the response may be: ‘It is some human being/person or some people who told me’. Or: ‘I was told by some people/someone I met in the market yesterday.’
Usually, such an answer would be enough for the questioner, and no further source identification would be required. There is no intention here of protecting the source; though confidentiality is recognised and cherished in another context.

However, there are statements which are attributed to unidentified sources: ‘they say/said....’ These types of statement seem to be suspect in many people’s view; and if a person is perceived as fond of making such vaguely attributed statements, especially if they concern uncomplimentary information or news about other persons and their character or situation, that reporter/speaker may become guilty of what the Yoruba call ‘nwon ni nwon ni’, which means, ‘they said, they said’.

This is the same expression that the Yoruba use for ‘rumour’. They regard a rumour as a statement that is attributed to a general, unspecified source, possibly fictitious. Among the Igbo, the expression for ‘rumour mongering’ is ‘igba asili’, meaning “circulating ‘they said’”. Therefore a rumourmonger has low credibility because his allegations or accusations are not seen as authenticated by possible nameable sources. Often the rumourmonger is challenged. A famous saying in West African pidgin English makes the point: ‘Dem say, dem say; who say?’

Usually the person asked cannot name anyone; or, to increase their credibility, they may be forced to lie, and to name someone, to accuse someone falsely of being the source of the information whose veracity had been suspected.

**Lies, damn lies**

A lie is deliberate falsehood; saying something that is not true. In Itsekiri, ‘ita ekun’ means ‘a vain or unjust story’. The liar cannot be trusted; and trust is seen as being at the centre of good social relations. A lie can be the falsification of fact; as the Itsekiri would say, ‘presenting something which is black and saying that it is white’. Lying is not making a factual error; it is deliberately misleading others through changing facts, or creating ‘facts that do not exist’. The lie cannot be corroborated by the evidence and experience of others; it is not like truth that is common knowledge. In fact, a lie is regarded as contra-factual.

Usually, a lie is directed at another; to undermine them or to gain advantage over them. The notion of injustice is dominant in perceptions of lie telling. There is sympathy for the ‘victim’ of the lie, as of an injustice; the person lied against is seen as someone who has been wronged, by being ‘pasted’ with a lie’ against his reputation (Slander).
Lying calls forth sanctions; and often recourse is had to the ancestors, praying them to punish the malefactor.

In Itsekiri cosmology it is expected that liars would be punished through ancestral intervention. In traditional jurisprudence, proven liars are punished by being asked to retract their statements, and to make amends if they wronged another or injured someone’s reputation. They also are asked to appease the ancestors through rituals, both to cleanse themselves and for the protection of the community or family forced to harbour such an evil-doer; for deliberate falsehood is considered an evil.

So the sanctions for deliberate falsification, ‘ita ekun,’ are both legal and moral. But there are ethical dimensions to lying as well. People can be induced to lie through promise of reward, or through threat of punishment. Thus professionals such as diviners or traditional healers may be induced, for whatever considerations, to give untrue predictions or incorrect prescriptions.

The Itsekiri do not approve of people being induced to lie, of taking or ‘eating’ bribes; and as for lying because of threats, physical or spiritual, they expect courage to repulse evil, as they believe that the courageous are assured of spiritual protection which is always available for the righteous and morally correct, through the force of ancestral and power and ‘natural justice’.

So we often hear a principled Itsekiri say: ‘a ma pa mi ara bo, me wa je se e’, meaning ‘even if you were to whip me to the point where my skin peels off, I will not agree to do it (what you ask of me)’. Courage is being willing to undergo the most severe physical torture. And why accept torture? Because the individual believes in doing what is right, what the ancestors accept and what they teach as right. There are persons who have a reputation, and are admired for being principled, for refusing to deviate from the truth, when to do so would have brought them obvious and easy personal gain.

Learning to tell the truth
The family and the community are where people learn to tell the truth, or at least, learn ‘not to lie’, and it is there that sanctions against lying are first applied, usually in the form of corporal punishment for the young liar. It is at tender ages also that people learn to be willing to suffer for refusing to lie, to be willing to be whipped until the skin peels, rather than to say that which the individual knows is not true. The struggle to maintain integrity is thus learnt early as a moral battle for which the individual must be prepared to pay a heavy price. And in that battle, many young people are brutalised...
into succumbing, learning to lie; and yet there are also others, probably the majority, who learn to refuse to succumb to falsehood.

**Statistics: How many have died?**
Africans can and do count. Every African language has a numerical system, for expressing quantity, and for undertaking numerical operations. Some systems are based on primary numbers from one to ten; and the multiples of ten. This is somewhat similar to English, for example. Others are based on twenty, and multiples of twenty, with a sub-system based on five. The basic issue is that every language can express numbers fairly exactly, if there is need to do so. The expression may become clumsy after one thousand, but it can be done.

The interesting communication problem is not only how number/quantity is expressed, but what significance is attached to quantity, psychologically. In Itsekiri culture, there is a reluctance to count human beings. Nevertheless if asked: how many people ate this meal? An Itsekiri would be able to say, “ten persons”, or “five men and ten women”, or even “fifteen people, ten of them women, and five of them men”. But the same person would say: “People were very many at the funeral.” If you pressed for an estimate, you would be told either that they were really very, very many persons, or that the people there were just like the sands of the sea; or you may be told that there were so many people, they could not be counted. In this wise, one may say that the Itsekiri ability scale of numbers and estimate of quantity, goes fairly comfortably from one to about fifty; thereafter it jumps to infinity!

A large banner in various parts of the business district of Cotonou, Benin Republic, proclaims: “AIDS IS IN BENIN! 168,000 people are living with AIDS in Benin. 500 Beninese are dying every day”. In 1998, 700 people were said to be dying from AIDS-related causes in Zimbabwe every week. Now the figure is 1000+. What difference do these figures make to many Africans, even those who have been to school? Do they serve as a deterrent? When is a number large enough to be alarming? Fifty? Uncountable? Does it matter?

**Igbogbo revisited**
In 1977–1982, with funding from UNFPA, UNESCO executed a research and training project implemented by the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. The project dealt with “Communication strategies for family planning in rural and semi-urban areas.” As Head of the host department, I was named National Director of the project.
The first activity was a study tour of Asian countries organized for two of my colleagues. One of them, Onuora Nwuneli, visited the Philippines, India and Korea. The other, Frank O. Ugboajah, toured the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia. The findings of the visits were published in our first monograph. Onuora Nwuneli was appointed Research Coordinator of the project to assist in carrying out the work plan over the next five years.

**Igbogbo: The people and community**

After several months of searching, we finally located a research and action site. Igbogbo, a semi-urban largely Moslem community of about 10,000 farmers and traders, was situated about 36 kilometers north of Lagos, near the town of Ikorodu. There, for over three years, we carried on our research and action programs related to project objectives.

We conducted social surveys designed to provide empirical data on the demographic, socio-economic and cultural realities of the village. We involved various local groups and individuals, men as well as women, in extensive discussions and structured in-depth interviews; and accumulated dozens of hours of audio-tape recordings. In retrospect, we had been conducting ‘focus group discussions’ FGDS, before they became popular in the literature and practice of population IEC. Our goal was to uncover the value structures, attitudes, knowledge and practices of the people of Igbogbo in areas of interest to planning and implementing communication strategies for promoting family planning services.

At the time, family planning was not a public issue in Nigeria. There was no indication that government was interested in considering a population policy; even though population questions related to census operations and results were already of national importance. The references to family planning tended to be either hostile, and some thought of it as unacceptable and unnecessary in the Nigerian context. It can be said that during that period of affluence, public attitudes were pro-natalist; and family planning was confined to the activities of the Planned Parenthood Federation of Nigeria, PPFN, the local IPPF affiliate.

**Igbogbo: The approach**

Our initial surveys in Igbogbo, and our own theoretical orientation suggested to us that targeting ‘family planning’ as an issue and promoting it directly would not be an effective approach. We were deeply convinced that the question of family size, and the value and meaning of having children, of marriage and family relations, were interrelated ideas connected with development and improvement in the condition of living of individuals and
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societies, and that family planning and population issues should consequently be examined in a multi-dimensional value context. We therefore, quite early decided to change the focus of our work to include family health, and family welfare in addition to family planning.

Reflecting our broad multi-disciplinary approach, our research team was composed of an economic historian (Babatunde Agiri), a public health physician (Larry Hunponu-Wusu), a Nursing Sister, a nutritionist (Remi Adegbenro) an environmental geographer (Jonathan Ekpenyong), in addition to communication researchers (Alfred Opubor and Onuora Nwuneli). Students of the Department of Mass Communication were recruited as research assistants and trainees on the project, since one of the objectives of the project was to institutionalize population communication in the curriculum of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos.

Preliminary steps
As we reviewed relevant literature, and studied the local environment, further reflection led us to a few important conclusions:

(i) the ideas and experiences which we will encounter about family life, and especially, husband-wife relations, child-rearing and family health, exist within a structure of values deeply rooted in the cultural and religious ideas and practices of the people of Igbogbo;
(ii) traditional practices of family planning/contraception, and attitudes towards family size are part of a structure of ideas within a logical framework, with underlying rationality, as well as contradictions and inconsistencies;
(iii) communication interventions designed to affect the knowledge, attitude and behavior of semi-urban and rural Nigerians should take into account, their cultural dispositions and social activities, and exploit them systematically;
(iv) exposure to modern mass media is selective on the part of villagers; but leisure time use of media is heavy, especially through exposure to ethnic-language entertainment radio programs and sports broadcasts;
(v) participation in ethnic group social activities is considerable, occupying much leisure time. Visiting relatives and friends, and engaging in communal socializing are valued, and generally practised;
(vi) consequently the theoretical orientation should focus on how to instigate attitude and behavior change on fertility, contraception and family life issues through exploiting the ‘chinks’ in the cultural armor. The
idea of ‘logical inconsistency’ lent itself as a potentially useful entry point for such a venture.

**Proposed communication strategy: Community festival**

As a logical extension of these and related findings, it was decided that we base our communication strategy on the ‘community festival’ as a culturally appropriate mass medium for social mobilization through participation. We therefore planned, with the collaboration of the people of Igbogbo, a Family Health and Family Welfare Festival that was held in December 1979.

The Festival took place over five days featuring particular events on each day. The first day was the formal opening of the Festival, involving representatives of the Lagos State government, the local government, and traditional leaders. The activities were well covered by the media. The second day focused on health, especially maternal and child health, with immunization of children and a contest for the healthiest babies, the best three of whom were rewarded with prizes donated by commercial firms. The third day highlighted agriculture, food and related technology; coordinated by our nutritionist in collaboration with extension staff from the Lagos State Ministry of Agriculture, and technology inputs from agricultural engineering students. Demonstrations on improved food preparation and new farming implements were much appreciated by the crowds that attended the Festival. On the fourth day, local culture was celebrated, with male and female age-group dance troupes from Igbogbo and surrounding villages. This was a truly participatory event with other villagers joining the dancers at will.

The fifth and final day, was the climax of the Festival, and for us the big event of our strategy. It was the premiere of the dramatic performance that we had been preparing for close to five months. In our in-depth discussions with the men and women of Igbogbo, we had come to appreciate the intricacies of family life issues. Bode Osanyin, our resident playwright/dramatist from the University’s Centre for Cultural Studies, had participated in our research work and discussions. Out of his insights and our briefing, he created a play: “AYITALE, the story of the fruits that crush the trunk.”

**Ayitale: The play**

Briefly, “Ayitale” tells the story of Ibisola, wife of a village bicycle repairer, Agboola. After eight children, in as many years, she is beginning to listen to the advice of the nurse in the health center that the time has come to put a halt to child bearing. But her husband would not hear of it. No argument was good enough to convince him that his wife’s body was tired; that he
could show he cared for her by agreeing to limit the size of his family, and by taking steps to prevent further births. Ibisola becomes pregnant again. Unable to survive the difficult birth of twins, she dies in childbirth, thus becoming the tree trunk that was crushed by the fruits.

In the final scene of the play, the husband, Agboola, walks onto the stage with the newly-born twins in his arms, ashamed, confused, in tears; a tragic victim of his own cultural rigidity and selfishness.

The actors, students of the local teacher-training college, had rehearsed hard and long for nearly four months straight, with our dramatist and research team, and gave a convincing and professional performance. The play’s use of local folklore and history as well as the local dialect of the Yoruba language created an instant bond with the largely indigenous audience of over 800 persons. Right from the opening dance drama, with its invocation of the praise names of the culture heroes and founding leaders of Igbogbo, and the accompanying sounds of talking drums, the audience was drawn into the action, and stayed with it all the way through to the inevitable tragic end.

There were few dry eyes in the open air village square in Igbogbo that December night in 1979 when the play was first performed. Men and women sniffled quietly. Some wept openly for Ibisola, and for Agboola and maybe even for themselves, in a kind of collective catharsis. It was a powerful emotional experience shared by the community, demonstrating the potential of drama as a mass medium; and vindicating our original intention of the festival and cultural performance as effective media of persuasive communication.

In the follow up research, three months and six months afterwards, more than 80 per cent of those interviewed remembered the story line and understood the lesson of the play, that unregulated fertility can bring misery and even death, and that it can and should be prevented.

**Ayitale: Theory and practice**

The theoretical underpinning of “Ayitale” was “logical inconsistency». Basically, it was argued that the same individual can hold, at the same time, thoughts or ideas which may be in contradiction. So long as these contradictory thoughts and ideas are not brought into direct confrontation, the individual is quite at ease. But should there be reason for these thoughts to confront one another, the individual will be forced to make a choice. The choice made implies a change of attitude with reference to one or other or both of the ideas in conflict.
For example, in our focus group discussions, the men of Igbogbo were adamantly opposed to abortions; they considered them evil and contrary to traditional values of responsible family life, attributing induced abortion to immoral women and girls trying to escape the results of their promiscuity or infidelity, both reprehensible.

We then presented the men with the following scenario:

‘Imagine your twelve year-old daughter on her way from school one afternoon. As she is passing through a secluded farm near the village, the local ‘madman’ grabs her, forces her down and rapes her. A little while later, she is discovered to be pregnant. What would you do’?

The reactions were immediate, violent and predictable. The men all expressed revulsion at the possibility that their daughters could carry the child of a man who was mentally ill; and that they would be grandfathers of such a child. What would they do? Without hesitation, they all would decide on abortion, which they considered traditionally justifiable under the circumstances.

For us the discussions were enlightening; they demonstrated that even strongly held attitudes and beliefs could be ‘moved’, if the right environment was created for re-evaluating them. We further argued that other issues involving family size and family planning could be approached in the same manner, and that the logical inconsistencies related to these issues could be exploited as a strategy for attitude and behaviour change. It was in that light that “Ayitale” was written and produced.

**Conclusion: The way forward**

The importance of the excerpts from my work-in-progress, provided above, is that although it shows how communication is perceived within some ethnic communities in Nigeria, it opens up a way of looking at the relationship between communication and culture. It thus provides a basis for understanding how people will view what they hear, what they see, what they are told, including about development problems, including HIV/AIDS, as a function of what communication categories and values they have learnt in their cultural background. It may be that this kind of close analysis is relevant for considering persuasive approaches for attempting culture-specific behavior and social change programs required for tackling HIV/AIDS.

Are there African theories of communication? Are there African theories of behavior and social change? What would these theories consist of? What would they focus on? Would they stress: individuals or social
groups or the individual-in-the-group? What communication strategies would be applicable for creating change, from an Afrocentric perspective? What are the meta-languages of African communication? Should we study them language by language and culture by culture, or their generalizable communication framework related to ‘Africanity’? What tools or combination of intellectual skills do we need to accomplish the task of answering such questions? What contribution can African social scientists: anthropologists, socio/psycho-linguists make to creating a knowledge base? Would comparative studies be valuable?

What can the Igbogbo experience teach us? How can we capitalize on it for our research and action programs? Perhaps one of the lessons from Igbogbo is in fact, that long before the current fad, we in Nigeria, at the University of Lagos, had developed a model of behavior and social change communication, based on the African community festival.

I have often advocated an ‘ethnography of communication’ approach. This would be a good time and place to take this agenda forward and see to what heights it might take us in our effort to understand how African societies view communication and how that knowledge may assist our efforts to place our discipline within our cultural contexts, and by so embedding it, provide us greater explanatory and applied power in our research and teaching as well as our programs of social change.

References