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## Indigenous knowledge, visualization and communication in African societies

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### Abstract

*Africans have various ways of communicating thoughts, beliefs systems, cultural practices, traditional knowledge and so on, to individuals and groups in societies. These methods are mainly through verbal and non-verbal languages. The non-verbal forms could be categorized into demonstrative, visual and institutionalized ways of expression. These are vital aspects of African oral traditions that people inherit and use to transfer information to successive generations. In this research, attempt is made to examine some visual folkloric elements which serve as traditional techniques for communication. The study is both field and library-based research which enable the researchers generate more data and information. The relevant materials for this work, therefore, are carefully gathered from both primary and secondary sources to support the discourse. The photographs presented in this study are carefully selected because of their relevance to the subject under discourse and they are qualitatively analyzed using the analytical and descriptive approaches. The research affirms that nonverbal and visual methods are employed by Africans to communicate indigenous knowledge to individuals and society in general. These are evident in the visual texts inserted in the body of the work.*

**Keywords:** folklore, communication, non-verbal, visual, knowledge

### Introduction

All societies have various methods of communicating their oral traditions to successive generations. These are often done through their indigenous language, verbal and nonverbal arts. The language of a group of people is actually the

means of conveying thoughts, beliefs, emotions, cultural practices and so on, to public domain. The thoughts and traditional knowledge of such people cannot be understood by non-indigenes without communication through language which is a vital aspect of every culture. Agha and Obianike (2019:39) stated that “language is a

distinctively human system of communication based on oral and written symbols. It is the vehicle through which people's culture is transmitted. It is an extremely important aspect of a community." The people must however be intelligible with the language and verbal arts that are predominantly utilized in conveying the thoughts, philosophical ideas and feelings of performers to audience in various communities. The transfer of oral traditions of any group of people is mostly done through verbal arts such as the folktales, myths, legendary stories, proverbial expressions and riddles, to mention a few. The utilization of these linguistic resources spreads across all cultures because they are the commonest ways of entertainment, social cohesion, education and promotion of societal norms, belief systems, cultural practices and philosophies of people.

According to Puke and Shaibu (2001:56-58), culture refers to "a whole body of knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, norms, customs, values, habits and other capabilities acquired by Nigerians as members of their society. In essence, Nigerian cultural heritage as a result is an embodiment of values and meanings constructed by cultural group or societies with high standards of originality." On the components and transmission of culture, the research of Inglis and Hughson (2003) reveals that "culture includes the thoughts, values and beliefs found within a given group." All these could be "expressed through symbols such as written languages and pictures" (cited in Bölükoğlu and Ceylan, 2015:2). The culture of a group of people are peculiar to them and they can be transmitted to successive generations through verbal and nonverbal means. However, the focus of this study is to examine the nonverbal methods of communicating indigenous knowledge vis-à-vis folklore materials to people in socio-cultural settings.

The concept of communication can be viewed by scholars in different ways which require some clarifications. According to Umudhe (2005:28), the term "Communication" was derived from the Latin word 'communicare'

which means "to make common, to share, to impart, to transit." In broad sense, the scholar observes that "Communication involves the production, transmission and reception of messages. It involves a source and extension of imagination in forms that can be learned and shared. In other words, communication is the production, perception and understanding of messages that bear man's notion of what is, what is related to something else" (28). In clarifying the meaning of communication, Umudhe (2005:28) acknowledged Anyanwu (1993) who asserted that communication consists of two forms, namely, verbal and non-verbal communication. In a verbal communication, the message or information is transmitted by words of mouth while non-verbal communication involves giving instructions without spoken words. It could be an expression through the mien, gestures and gesticulations, and even signs and symbols" (28). As stated earlier, the verbal mode of communicating cultural norms, ideas and practices is predominant in every traditional setting but the thrust of this study is to explore the nonverbal techniques applied by rural dwellers which is intelligible to successive generations. In buttressing the submission of Anyanwu (1993) above, Ademilokun (2012:76) states that "communication is essential to the survival of humankind as all living creatures have the need and capacity for it. This veritable human activity manifests itself in symbolic and verbal forms." Thoughts, feelings, experience and knowledge acquired over the years can be transferred to successive generations through verbal and non-verbal modes. However, the scholar established that "although the verbal means of communication is generally perceived to serve better communicative purposes than the non-verbal one, the non-verbal has been confirmed to have as much capacity for meaning transmission as the verbal" (76). This assertion will illuminate the current paper as it foregrounds the purpose of the study which is to examine the nonverbal techniques employed in communication in socio-cultural settings besides the verbal arts.

Interestingly, certain imagery and themes can be activated during nonverbal arts such as cultural festivals, wrestling contests, mask dancing, ritual rites of circumcision, funeral rites and so on. These are dramatic, visual and nonverbal expressive arts that audience appreciate in societies particularly in Africa. Though these expressive forms could be dated to primordial era in society, they are obviously folkloric elements that are often stored in the unconscious mind and later communicated to successive generations to appreciate and document. There are basically two methods of communication in society which are the use of verbal (oral expression) and non-verbal languages. The non-verbal forms could be categorized into demonstrative, visualized and institutionalized ways of expression. These are vital aspects of African oral traditions that are inherited and transferred to successive generations. This study attempts to examine non-verbal and visual folkloric elements employed by Africans as traditional techniques for communicating indigenous knowledge. Apart from the foregoing, there are specific objectives which include to examine the concept of communication, various traditional methods of communication, non-verbal folklores and visual arts employed as ways of communication in societies.

### **Methodology**

This study is both field and library-based research since the researchers aim at generating sufficient data and information. The relevant materials for this work were carefully gathered from both primary and secondary sources to support the discourse. The primary data were selected due to their relevance to the subject matter. Also, research data were collected through non-participant observation of characters, scenes and images that are of great significance to the current study. The sources of the secondary materials were mainly the Internet, newspapers and textbooks. The data were subjected to qualitative analysis using descriptive and analytical methods. Arbi (2018)

acknowledged Denzin and Lincoln (1994) who observe that, “qualitative research focuses on interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings to make sense in terms of the meanings people bring to these settings. The findings of Denzin and Lincoln further revealed that, “Qualitative research involves collecting information about personal experiences, introspection, life story, interviews, observations, historical, interactions and visual text which are significant moments and meaningful in peoples' lives”. The collection of research data and information in the aforementioned forms is followed by data analysis. Bodgan and Sugiyono (2012:88) posit that “analyzing data is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field’s notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others”. The data and information for this research are carefully and qualitatively analyzed focusing on dramatic dances, wrestling competition, festivals, and other research materials collected directly from the field and also from the Internet. This was done in consonance with purpose of this study which is to examine the nonverbal and visual folkloric elements as means of communicating indigenous knowledge of people in societies.

### **Communication in African Settings**

The thought patterns, feelings and actions of individuals can be expressed or communicated orally, through imitation and demonstration. In every African traditional society as could be found elsewhere, people identify and express the forms, contents and their lifestyles in their indigenous languages. Thoughts, ideas, perceptions, emotional feelings and actions can be communicated traditionally in diverse ways either verbally or through non-verbal (visuals) means. However, in this research our focus is on the non-verbal and visual method of communicating indigenous knowledge of people in socio-cultural settings. The first non-verbal

means of communication is the demonstrative form that involves conveying of messages through folk music, signals and iconographics (use of objects and flora media). Objects or indexical resources may signify events, things, concepts, and so on, in socio-cultural settings. All materials of folklore are indexical signs, indicating the relationship between the people and certain objects in their culture. For instance, the presentation of a plate of kolanuts to guests, garden eggs, a glass of water, cowries and bracelets, to mention a few, at different occasions are symbolic in African societies. Also, expressive acts like ritual rites, sacrifices, pouring of libations, initiations, and so on, are demonstrative methods of communication. These oral traditions are performed dramatically and aesthetically for audience to see, interpret and transmit from one generation to another.

There is also a visual form of communication which entails the use of pictures (images) in communicating ideas, thoughts and feelings to audience. Here, the visual information is not communicated through spoken nor written languages. Visuals like verbal languages are effective media of human communication as they are utilized to convey both factual and affective meanings and messages to audience in societies. The research of Unuabonah (2010:62) reveals that, "Nonverbal communication is concerned with the process of sending and receiving messages through wordless and visual medium which aid verbal language. Thus, communication can be carried out through gestures, touch posture, and facial expression." The scholar while expatiating his submission on the subject of nonverbal arts states that, "meaning can be communicated through clothing, hairstyle and architecture" (62). Based on the above, visual means of expression include the use of colours, dressing style, attitudes, emotional expressions, behaviours patterns, physical appearance and so on. The colour, 'black' connotes something negative, sorrowful and aberration in most societies, 'red' stands for danger while 'white' stands for peace, purity and chastity. The hairstyles and mode of dress of people also reveal

more about such group or individuals. All these shall be examined in this study later.

It is worthy of note that folklore elements promote visual and other forms of imagery which have certain effects on audience. According to Arbi (2018:44), imagery refers to "a depiction of the experience associated with an object, event, and situation that the poet experienced using typical words in order to provide a more real picture, good things that are psychological, material, and metaphoric." The scholar further reveals that "there are several types of imagery: Visual imagery or (Sight), Auditory Imagery or (Sound), Tactile Imagery or (Touch), Olfactory Imagery (Smell), and the last is Gustatory Imagery or (Taste)". In this research, our focus was restricted to only visual imagery which is that of sight. Altenbernd and Lewis (1967:12) argue that, "visual imagery gives an effect in the mind much like that produced by our perceiving a visible object through the eye, the optic nerve, and the appropriate regions of the brain" (cited in Trisnawat, 2010:126). Apart from the foregoing, there is the institutionalized method of communication that refers to the use of traditional institutions as symbolic representations in socio-cultural settings. An institution could be defined as an organized way of getting things properly done and such institutions are culturally appreciated as they document, promote and activate the human mind on information relating to cultural beliefs, practices and other folkloric forms which are verbally or non-verbally transmitted from one generation to another. Instances include marriage ceremony, funeral rites, traditional festivals, masquerade dances, masks, secret cults, chieftaincy confirmation and ritual rites of circumcision, to mention a few.

### **Visual Methods of Communication in Society**

The discourse above has revealed that Africa like other societies across the world has several ways of transmitting ideas, feelings, norms, personal experiences and cultural beliefs to successive generations. During such communication process, audience should be



attentive in order to assimilate and comprehend the messages being conveyed. However, this study attempts to examine some of the visual modes of expression with a view to preserving and also promoting the African rich cultures in contemporary society.

### **African Musical Instruments**

**Figure 1:** Drums



**Figure 2:** Shakers



**Figure 3:** Native guitar



**Figure 4:** Metal gongs



The picturesque information in the above musical instruments symbolizes the distinctive society where they are used for performances. In diverse African societies, instruments that are employed for the accompaniment of song renditions are often culture-based. In Nigeria, for instance, one can identify peculiar musical instruments among the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Urhobo, Effik, Idoma, Ijaw, and Calabar, to mention a few. In the past decades, there have been indigenous knowledge transfer among ethnic groups especially due to the availability of the internet, the social media, migration, and so on. This acculturation has greatly enhance

communication and also influence the thinking faculties and behavioural patterns of individuals in societies. According to Bölükoğlu and Ceylan (2015:2), communication established between different cultures is an exchange process in which peoples' feelings, thoughts, knowledge etc. are transferred. This process is of the utmost importance for transferring our culture and saving our cultural heritage." This implies that culture is transient and the channels of transferring its elements are basically through verbal and non-verbal methods.

### **Traditional Festivals**

Cultural festivals are mostly celebrated annually and these are institutionalized means of communication that can be visualized during performances. In most traditional societies, there are festivals in honour of gods, for creation of deities, chastity of maidens, rituals of circumcision and legendary figures, to mention a few. Omosule (2010:90) notes that, “Festivals are climatic events in the people’s calendar when time is communally unique and spent in honour of the communal spirit just as the stage is held sacred and reserved for the amplification of the value that are held sacrosanct and spent in disorder through collective conviviality. Festivals are synonymous with the suspension of moral codes just as sanctioned disorder holds sway and abnormality in rife.” The scholar further observes during his research that, “most indigenous festivals exhibit such behavioural traits among the folks even when decorum and abstinence represent a negation of the acceptable lifestyle as the performance lasts. The whole arena is the stage and normal life patterns are put on hold” (90).

Festivals can take diverse dramatic forms in cultural settings. For instance, a traditional festival can be organized in form of competitions between villages to discover the best dancers. During the event, colourful costumes and masks are worn by the villagers who pay homage to certain spirits in society. In some societies, cultural festival assume the dimension of a beauty contest with cultural dances, music and other performing arts which are dramatically showcased. Some cultural festivals as Omosule (2010:91) found out are employed to “celebrate success, the vastness of nature and the indispensability of celestial harmony. And each case, the festival brought to a spectacular height through the employment of mime, drumming, dancing, singing and feasting. In whichever case, the enactment of a repetition of the primeval development which faint recollections constitute their modern equivalents” (91). In Nigeria, traditional festivals include New Yam Festival among the Igbo, Egungun Festival of the Yoruba, Iyeri festival of (Ughelli) Urhobo people, and several others.



**Figure 5:** Reed Dancers in South Africa



**Figure 6:** Iyeri Festival of Ughelli People

Cultural festivals irrespective of the period of their celebrations, are methods of transmitting cultural values, beliefs, arts, and other folklore materials from one generation to another. The

performances are often characterized with singing, chanting, acrobatic displays, incantations, gestures and movements, to mention a few. All these are put together to

convey the significance of the festivals to the audience.

### **Creative Works and Arts**

Information about the culture of people can also be expressed through imaginative and artistic works. In some African societies, the forms and contents of folklore are found in creative works of African authors, newspaper and magazine features. Also, certain norms, cultural beliefs and philosophical ideas are expressed to members of the public through inscriptions on commercial vehicles, textiles, basins, buildings and signboards, to mention a few for people to visualize and assimilated into their unconscious mind. They are originally collected, transcribed and written in indigenous languages of the people while in some cases these works are expressed in foreign languages such as the English and French. All artistic works are visual and they convey meanings that can be understood by audience who are familiar with such cultural elements. In the past, creative arts could be created and worshipped as idols, representing gods, ancestral spirits, guiding angels, deities, and evil spirits, to mention a few. There are some art works that depict fertility, motherhood, profession, Supreme Being, gods, heroic personalities, aquatic, terrestrial and arboreal animals, and so on.

In African societies, clothing (textile designs) is another non-verbal channel of communication that members of the public can visualize and appreciate. For instance, cloths are manufactured

or designed locally or in overseas and imported into African communities but the images they evoke make local retailers and buyers ascribe names to them. The naming of textiles is not restricted to any particular African society. Cloth names are described with phrases, proverbs, metaphorical expressions, and they have various patterns of design that informed their special names. For instance, textiles are designed with ladders, flowers, aquatic (fish, dolphins, tortoise), bricks, staircase, stars and crescent (moon), wild animals (tiger, lion, crocodile, snakes), plants/crops, trees and currencies (money).

Textiles are manufactured in some ethnic groups in Africa and they are popularly referred to as *African Wax Prints* (or Ankara). These are parts of the non-verbal method of communication among African men and women in societies. They can be named after major cities, countries, personalities, and occasions or according to the designs on the fabrics. In terms of sources, African textiles are made of animal hair and woven as could be found among the Yoruba, Igbo, Ewe, Ashanti, Kanga, Kitenga, and so on. Some of these textiles include *Ukara* and *Akwete* cloth (Igbo, Nigeria), *Adire* and *Aso Oke* fabrics (Yoruba, Nigeria), *Kente* woven cloth (Ewe and Ashanti, Ghana), *Kanga* and *Kitenge* (Tanzania and Eastern Africa countries), *Ankara* or African Wax Prints (West Africa), etc. This mode of communication is visual. See Yoruba and Igbo textiles below;





**Figure 7** African textile: Handmade Clothing



**Figure 8** Yoruba 'Adire eleko' wrapper



**Figure 9** AKWETE: Igbo traditional textile



**Figure 10** Igbo Ukara Cloth, African fabric

Proverbial names of textile designs abound in African societies such as Akan, Ghana and they are expressed in African languages. Though most textiles are designed in English, retailers and buyers translate their names into indigenous versions for easy identification and also convey messages to the public. Textiles are also designed to convey political, cultural and religious messages and slogans to members of the public. Africa is known for polygamous system of marriage and sometimes, co-wives communicate through cloth designs and dress style with scarf to match. Some of the textiles depict generosity, wisdom lore, faithfulness, and so on, in their matrimonial homes. Closely related to the art and

creative works discussed above is the craftworks. These folkloric materials exist among the Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Urhobo, Benin, Ijaw, Itsekiri and Ibibio, to mention a few. They are non-verbal means of expressions that cut across every ethnic nationality in Africa. Instances of craftworks include wood carving, carving of scepter and deity, mask-making, boat-building, weaving, cloth dyeing, and so on. The sight of these art works will activate the mental consciousness of viewers who shall decipher the source of the works, the ethnic group which they are traceable to and what they symbolized in society.

#### **Worship of God and Divinities**



Traditional religions, cultural beliefs, practices and modes of worship abound in African traditional societies. This is attributed to the fact that Africans believe in the worship of God and divinities. First, they acknowledge that there is one Supreme Being, Creator and Maker of the entire universe mostly called God. Their knowledge of the Almighty God is embedded in various cultural myths across the African Continent. For instance, Elders in traditional societies regularly pour libations and offer prayers to God, the Creator of heaven and earth for blessing, guidance and protection. This is common among elders in Yoruba, Igbo, Urhobo, and other ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Apart from the Almighty God, Africans believe in the existence of divinities, ancestral spirits and other spirits that reside in the sea, water, air, farm, forest and burial grounds, to mention a few. Cults of divinities abound in shrines and altars in various communities in Africa. They are usually consecrated in the honour of respective divinities (gods, deities) and offered prayers, offerings and (blood) sacrifices. Divinities and ancestors serve as mediators to their people (worshippers), providing spiritual guidance and power. Though both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication are noticeable during the foregoing performing arts, most of the activities are demonstrative, making the exercise visual and memorable to audience.

### **Cultural Dances and Movements**

These are cultural dances which are performed by womenfolk, maidens, youths and

other traditional dancers and the various skills and patterns are demonstrated as ways of communicating messages to audience. Folk dances are also known as cultural dances and they are often transferred to successive generations. This is a non-verbal mode of communication or expression of folklore and it is visual. Dances in some communities could convey information about royalty, chastity, occupation, warrior, magical powers, cultural beliefs, practices, and so on. For instance, among the Okpe (Urhobo) people of Delta State, the physical appearance, costumes, and props which they have displayed during their dance steps as shown below reveals their primordial occupations, warlike nature and superstitious beliefs of the people. This traditional dance is dramatic, educative and entertaining since it requires critical thinking and imagination for the audience to understand and appreciate the war songs, the dance steps and various movements during the performance. The research of Georgios (2018:106) reveals that, "the communication between the dancer and the viewer is indirect and gets perceived through the dance act. This artistic dance act is a product of practice and preparation in the premises of cultural associations, schools and universities, and as a result there are no intense improvisation and creative elements." The researcher further asserts that "the messages sent to the viewer aim at making good impressions and are not so much emotionally charged as used to be in the "primary form" of dance that had to do mostly with the "experiential" learning process from generation to generation" (106).



**Figure 11** Heroic Dramatic Dance from Okpe-Urhobo at the 90<sup>TH</sup> Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) Anniversary Held at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho, Delta State in 2021.



**Figure 12** Okpe-Urhobo Cultural Group showcasing Heroic Exploits Through Dramatic Dance at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho in 2021.

The picturesque portrayal of the dance drama above will make the performance remain memorable because of the unique and realistic presentation of the dance steps with dancers that appear dreadful, fierce-looking, serious and primitive in their costumes. They have shown their strong cultural believe in the protective powers of the gods and ancestors hence some of them wear charms, and demonstrate their potency before the audience. The fresh palm fronds are symbolic in traditional African societies particularly among the Urhobo, Igbo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Yoruba and so on. They are often used for protection, cleansing, design of sacred places, wading off of evil spirits and so on.

The cultural significance of dance and movements in communities cannot be overemphasized. As shown in the photographs above, the cultural dancers have through their creative and expressive performance showcased the heroic exploits of their people as often handed to generations through oral histories. Though some of the dance performances are transmitted through verbal means, it has become obvious that what people visualize is more memorable and concretized compared to aural and verbal means of communication. The study by Lykesas *et al.* (1999) revealed that;

*The traditional dance represents society itself as it provides artistic/dancing expression, entertains, teaches and nurtures through the dynamics of rhythmic movements. By participating in dance movement activities, individuals discover their rhythm, reveal their expressive improvisational and creative skills, cultivate and improve their interpersonal relationships, communication and collaboration not only with other participants in these dance activities but also with*

*the broader social environment (cited in Georgios, 2018:105).*

**Figure 13** A Cross Section of Dignitaries enchanted by Dramatic Dance Performances at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho in 2021.

The *Ema* dance performance from Ughelli Kingdom hews the royalty of the people where such performance often takes place in Urhobo land. Findings revealed that this cultural dance was performed in the past by *Ilorogun* or *Ehovwore* (traditional chiefs) and such dances were originally performed at special occasions to entertain traditional rulers, chiefs and dignitaries to mention a few. However, the sacredness and dignity associated with this supposed royal dance performance has become a thing of the past as people now perform this cultural dance at funeral ceremonies in order to make ends meet. In appreciating the significance of dance in human communication, Hawkins (1988:3) stated that dance is “one of man's oldest and most basic means of expression. Through the body, man speaks senses and perceives the tensions and rhythm of the universe around him, and using the body as the instrument, he expresses his feelings and responses to the universe.” The audience in the above picture are entrapped by the dramatic performance of the troupe from Okpe-Urhobo but the understanding of the messages being communicated to viewers depend on their fore knowledge of the cultural and historical background of the art.

Masquerade dances are usually performed as a part of traditional festivals celebrated annually in most communities in Nigeria. This dramatic form of performance evident among the Yoruba, Ibo, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, and many other ethnic nationalities too numerous to mention. The dancers are disguised with facemasks whose meanings are known to most of the audience and they assume different shapes, sizes and make. In affirming the significance of dancing in





traditional settings, Georgios (2018:105) acknowledged Tyrovola (1999) who asserts that when dancing, one actually “talks” with oneself and with the community at the same time. In this way the community reinforces its cohesion, gets connected with their past where values derive from, gets amused and delivers folk tradition by repetition, continuity and word of mouth.” In corroborating the foregoing, Georgios

(2018:105) acknowledged Gilbert (2015) posits that, “there is no doubt that when dancing one comes face to face with their own self and gets more familiar with their body and body use in terms of space, time and dynamics. Dance enhances their ability to read and decode the quality of their motion and moving body, to interpret ideas and emotions symbolically through their body movements.”



**Figure 14** Emedjo-Masquerade Dance During the 90<sup>th</sup> Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) Anniversary Held at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho, Delta State in 2021.

Cultural dances are dramatic with aesthetics of costumes and props often presented as expressive means of conveying social class, royalty, heroism, maidenhood, cultural occupations, and re-enactment of historical events, to mention a few, among a group of people. Apart from the conveyance of oral traditions through the foregoing, the ritual rites and practice of female circumcision is also communicated to successive generations through processions to public places such as the market squares with cultural dances and song performances. These are demonstrated to educate and enlighten audience about the rich cultural heritage of the Urhobo people as could be found in other societies. Although there is strong campaign against the cultural practice of female genital mutilation in societies, this traditional rites is also being preserved in some

communities where female circumcisions have been regarded as part and parcel of the custom and tradition of the people. In some places, this exercise is perceived as the occasion for celebration of chastity and maidenhood by parents and society in general. The investigation carried out by Georgios (2018:106) shows that;

*The communication process begins when the dancer wishes to pass on information to the viewer/s. Then the dancer (transmitter) encodes what s/he wants to convey using a code of movements and forms a message. Through the dance act, s/he conveys the message to the viewer (recipient). The viewer*

*then receives the message, decodes it, interprets it, and ultimately recognizes, perceives, understands, feels what the dancer wished to carry forward.*

From the above assertion, we found out that there are three channels or elements of communication through dance performance and

these are the dancer, the dance and the viewer(s) who must watch attentively in order to comprehend the message being conveyed by the dancer(s). Georgios therefore affirms that, "This form of communication usually has the desired effect; it affects the viewer's or viewers' knowledge, thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and has to do with the projection of the "aesthetic aspect" of dance" (106).



**Figure 15** Female Circumcision Dance Performance during the 90<sup>TH</sup> Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) Anniversary Held at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho, Delta State in 2020.





**Figure 16** Female Circumcision Dance Performance at the conference on Bruce Onobrakpeya @ 90 Held on August 4th – 6th, 2022 at Onobrak’s Centre Agbarha-Otor, Delta State.

Female circumcision rites is mostly practiced and celebrated among the Urhobo particularly the Ughienvwen People in Ughelli South and Udu Local Government Areas of Delta State. The picture above shows the display of one of such ceremonies of circumcision. The case of circumcision rites appears to be going into extinction except in a few ethnic groups. Ritual rite of circumcision is often celebrated in some African societies annually. The findings of previous studies have shown that “The interpretation of the dance phenomenon is based on the fact that the dance is a means of communication” serving various purposes and functions that could be ranked according to the “communication triangle” (transmitter-message-receiver) and determine the transformation parameters” (Bratopoulou, 1994). The study carried out by Romain (2002) has shown that:

*Dance has always brought people together, forging a place where mind and body, interacting with one another, take precedence*

*over all other things. Dance is a time when a person may forget all of their worries and concentrate on the here and now. It is through dance when any community comes together and shows its solidarity. It is within dance that social interactions are made and where the community springs to life. It is with dance where people affirm their beliefs as a community and come together in praise of life, God, death, etc. (9).*

The foregoing revealed that dance serves as a means of social cohesion, therapy and an avenue to celebrate the Almighty creator, heroic exploits, and the exit of people from this world. As an expressive method and cultural significance, Romain (2002:23) states that,



“many times traditional African dances were made to bring people together and express a sense of joy. By using dance only as a tool for gaining power, the fun and joy in dance could be lost. Instead, dance like other art forms can be used as a point of recognition.”

In some cultural societies, wrestling precede song performances and dances. Traditional wrestling is a dramatic aspect of our culture that shows expression of physical strength, skills, and courage among peers. In some communities,



**Figure 17** Senegalese Traditional Wrestlers in Action

titles or hearts of beautiful maidens are won by great wrestlers after series of competitions. This traditional dramatic performance exists among the Igbo, Ughwerun (Urhobo) people, Ijaw, Eleme, and so on. In some communities, wrestling contests are done regularly primarily for entertainment but in times of security and intercommunal wars, famous wrestlers and other able-bodied men are mobilized, fortified and deployed by community leaders to defend their people from external aggressions.



**Figure 18** Eleme Wrestlers in Rivers State, Nigeria

It is worthy of note that every society has diverse means of entertainment which include folk dances, singing, storytelling, riddle performances, and wrestling to mention a few. In traditional society, wrestling is a means of communication that is visual, non-verbal and it cuts across societies in Africa.

### **Hairstyles and Symbolic Representation**

Every culture has various patterns of hair for men and women, and these are of great significance to the people in the communities. Through hairstyles, Africans express their views, thoughts, feelings, religions and social status. According to Adiji, *et al* (2015:25), “hair styles are uniquely distinctive, autonomous, self-contained, unified, exclusive of the extraneous

and complete in themselves because they occur in the context of people, human life and culture, ideas and history. Aesthetic taste in Nigeria differs widely between cultural groups and other affiliations.” The findings of Senghor (1977:80-82) reveal that whether ancient or contemporary, in West Africa political institutions, traditions of moral values, languages, literature, and the fine arts all derive from Black culture. The culture of a people is so strong that it is expressed even in the way the people walk, laugh or cry. Socially, hairstyles serve as means of communicating messages in traditional societies. They depict age, marital status, socio-economic background, ethnic identity, religion, wealth and so on. Adiji, *et al* (2015:24) observe that “traditional Nigerian hair styles are attractive because of their

powerful emotional content and beautiful, abstract design principles. Their bare essentials of line, shape, texture and pattern can be considered an aspect of industrial art or design. Hundreds of distinct cultures in Nigeria create over one thousand different hair styles according to their environments and cultural heritage” (24). The researchers also found that “Among women in Nigeria, long hair was considered a mark of beauty, and a woman’s hair was never cut except as a baby, or as a sign of deep mourning or ill health. Women gave much thought to the care and decoration of their hair” (29).

In the Mendel culture of Sierra Leone, for instance, women’s long hairstyle symbolize prosperity, ownership of bountiful farms and many healthy children. They also carry braided styles adorned with ornaments like beads and cowrie shells, medals, pieces of silvers, mental rings, amulets, and feathers to mention a few. The research carried out by Adiji, *et al* (2015:24) show that, “Ceremonies and festivals, in particular, are characterized by specific designs,

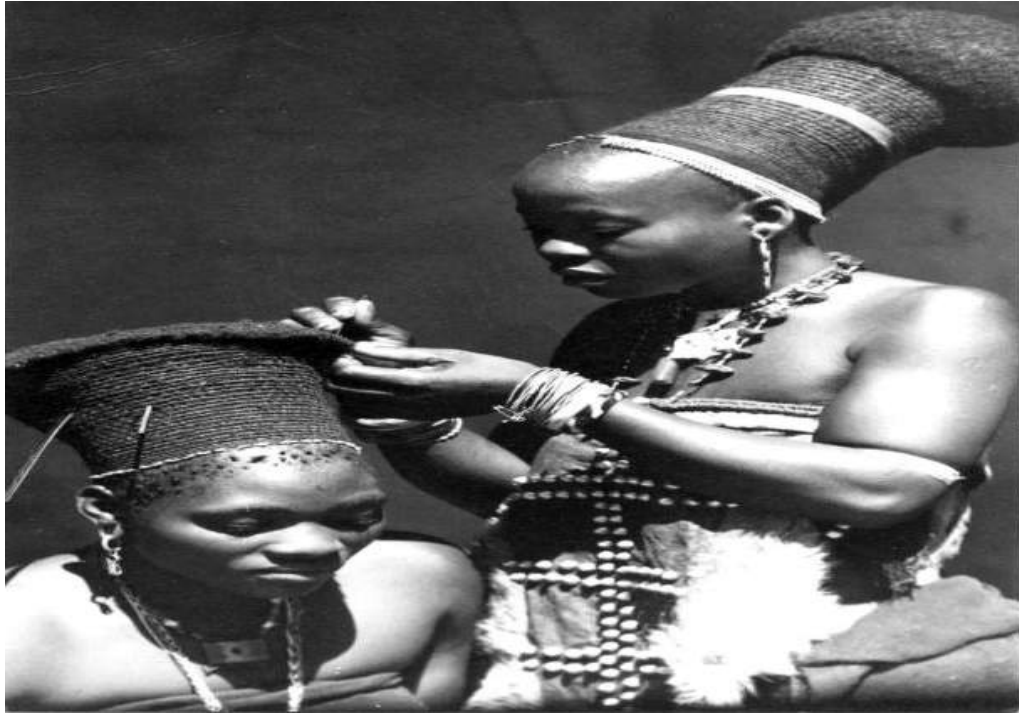
**Figure 19** Fulani Hairstyle with Beads in Northern Nigeria



with every clan and tribe representing their cultural hair styles. Similarly, idol worshippers design their hair styles in connection to gods. These two examples express ancestral beliefs and religious faith in unique ways that result in a great, meaningful variation on art and design forms.” There are predominantly Fulani hairstyles such as braiding of hair long to the neck with beads attached. Every culture has their hairdos but acculturation has given room for import and export of different patterns of hair such as plaiting, weaving or braiding across African societies. For instance, there are hairstyles such as cornrows, Ghana braids (weaving or braiding), French braids, twist braids, ponytail and Yoruba didi hairstyles, to mention a few. Hairdos are not restricted to a particular cultural society but peculiar hairstyles are common in places where the people appreciate and preserve their folklores for onwards transmission to other generations.

**Figure 20** Another Fulani Hairstyle





**Figure 20** Traditional Zulu Hairstyles in South Africa

Women in Zulu traditional societies also make their hair to express their emotions, social status and pride. In some traditional societies, there are special hairstyles for newly circumcised maidens and married ladies (brides), bereaved widows, and so on. For instance, circumcised and newly married ladies often plait beautiful and attractive hairdos to show their happy mood and family background, while the bereaved women (especially widows) are expected to shave their heads after months of bereavement. Oziogu (2012, 50-52) observes that there is “a symbolic hair style designated for spinsters, unmarried women, elderly women, women who have passed child-bearing age, and childless women. In the same vein, “children’s coated their heads thickly with cam wood-paste and tucked cowries into it, aimed at bringing out messages of love and affections home to the public and their communities about one festival or ceremony.” The findings further indicate that every hairstyle has symbolic interpretation in socio-cultural settings. He asserts thus;

*Cowries were regarded as a symbol of fertility, so*

*when a childless woman wore that style long ago, the message was vividly understood by members of her community. A spirited elderly woman and man would always give words of encouragement and blessings each time they encountered a woman with a cowry. Likewise, in Yoruba land a hair style from the forehead which ends at the back of the neck indicates that the carrier is married (50-52).*

The use of cowries could be traced to primordial era where people particularly adherents of African traditional religion (ATR) such as priests, priestesses, diviners, soothsayers and so on, decorated their bodies, clothes, hairdos with these natural ornaments. The utilization of these elements of folklore is still in vogue in some communities despite the wide spread of Christianity and civilization. In some



situations, people wear cowries as bracelets, necklaces and anklets either for fashion or protection against certain evil spirits. Findings also reveals that in some societies, cowries are kept together with money to prevent spiritual theft. The meaning attached to cowries by individuals and ethnic groups cannot be quantified as what they symbolize is peculiar to societies.

### Conclusion

The study has shown that several non-verbal folklore forms abound to communicate cultural norms, beliefs, practices and cosmology to audience in various African societies. Such communication means include festivals, art and crafts, wrestling, textile designs, ritual rites of circumcision and initiations, religious beliefs, folk dances, building patterns, hairstyles and mode of dress, to mention a few. The interpretation of these non-verbal arts can be made with their messages understood by audience who has indigenous knowledge of what they actually symbolize in society.

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