

The role of Ethnomedia in contemporary communication dynamics: a case study of the Bukusu folk media

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URI: <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke:8080/handle/123456789/3809>

Date: 2010

Abstract:

This study investigated the role of ethnomedia in today's fast changing communication landscape with special focus on the Bukusu folk media. The communication technology is shifting from analogue to digital. By 2012 Kenya is expected to have fully gone digital. Printed matter such as books and newspapers today can be read electronically. FM radio stations have sprung up in almost every district and are broadcasting in vernacular languages pre-dominant in the target district. Television stations too have increased their coverage areas. As such hitherto inaccessible areas are now increasingly consuming television broadcasting. Mobile phones have become tools through which the internet and television reaches rural areas. These changes have enabled folk media to enjoy a wide reception in Kenya. This study investigated the role of Bukusu folk-songs, folktales and proverbs in the current communication dispensation. In order to do this, the study employed a qualitative research approach. The researcher interviewed key informants, distributed self administered questionnaires and used both participant and non-participant methods to gather the raw data for this study. The following research questions guided the study;

- Which virtues are exalted by Bukusu music, proverbs and folktales?
- What are the emerging trends in the organization, structure and performance of Bukusu folk-stories, traditional music and proverbs?
- Examine and interpret the usage of Bukusu folk media by modern print and electronic media, politicians and other groups.
- Examine and explain melding between traditional bukusu and exogenous forms of knowledge.
- What is the role of Bukusu ethnomedia in the current communication dynamics?

The Bukusu community is largely an oral one. As a result the society's traditional media plays a central role in disseminating information in the community. For example, this study established that folk media is used by the Ministry of Health to spread anti- AIDS/HIV messages among other health advocacy efforts. Agricultural extension officers in Bungoma district too use folk music to educate farmers on new farming methods. Folk media is therefore instrumental in mobilizing people at the grassroots level for community development. The three FM stations broadcasting in Lubukusu in Bungoma district - Mulemhe FM, West FM and Radio Jambo - have taken advantage of folklore and are using them to entertain and educate their listeners. Bukusu elders are always invited into the studios of these radio stations and through proverbs and songs they counsel people and reconstruct the migratory history of the community. During funerals, songs are used to console the bereaved. Dirges are sung to espouse the bereaved family to remain strong and united in the hope that they will meet the dead person in the spirit when their turn comes. Vernacular languages have been found to be popular in rural areas and as a result the advertisement industry is using them to advertise goods and services. The Interim Independent Electoral Commission (IIEC) used them to urge Kenyans to register as voters in 2010. The Committee of Experts (CoE) too used vernacular language adverts to encourage Kenyans to vote for the new constitution in the August 2010 referendum.

Among Babukusu, proverbs serve aesthetic purposes. Elders and politicians like using them in order to be considered eloquent. Bukusu traditional musicians compose lyrics which castigate anti-social behaviours and praise excellence. Folktales, songs and proverbs warn, caution and advise people against egocentrism, laziness and other vices. Folktales attempt to answer etymological questions such as why the dog is domesticated. Among the Bukusu are very popular with children. Folk -stories are narrated to them in the evening as they retire to bed. There is the melding of traditional and exotic knowledge as far as folklore is concerned. Folktales are serialized in newspapers and broadcast on both radio and television. However, social migrations, formal education and urbanization are undermining the significance of folktales among Babukusu. These have resulted in reduced contact between children and their grandparents who are custodians of traditional knowledge which is largely disseminated orally through folk media. This therefore calls for the strengthening of cultural centers in urban settings which are supposed to serve as replacements for grandparents. Some traditional musicians in Bungoma district are fusing bukusu lyrics with Lingala as a way of attracting youthful listeners who would otherwise view purely traditional tunes as archaic. The hospitality and entertainment industry do organize cultural events in major towns to allow urbane people come in contact with their cultures and customs. Mulembe Night is one such event in which luyia speakers come together to celebrate their culture. This study recommends that the Nairobi based Bomas of Kenya cultural center should be decentralized to other ethnically heterogeneous towns in order to allow children and adults who visit them to experience their traditional cultures. The National Theatre in Nairobi too should be replicated in major towns across the country in order to allow students access folklore and to be inspired to pursue careers in art and oral literature. Schools too should nurture talents in folk music and dance by enabling students to compete in the annual Music and Drama Festivals for schools and colleges. The findings of this study indicate that folk media are part of a large socio-political organization. They report and criticize organs within the system and provide education on norms and morals. They are also key in mobilizing people for community development and national consciousness.