

## The Challenges Facing Traditional Modes of Communication (folk media) in Nambale Sub County

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**ABSTRACT:** Communication pattern of any society is part of its total culture and it can be understood in the context of its social structure, organization and institutions. The modes and processes of communication in any culture areas old as mankind. Every community has its own traditional communication modes commonly known as folk media, which serves as significant tool in the process of motivating the people in the desired direction. On the other hand, the traditional media may not perform the role expected from it due to some limitations. With this background this study was conducted in Nambale Sub County of Kenya to find out challenges facing ingenious media. Folk artists and folk media fans were snowballed and interviewed on the challenges facing the folk media industry in the region. Observations of the indigenous media industry also informed this study. As such it was established that folk media industry in Nambale is facing challenges such as pressure from new media formats, traditional restrictions, lack of infidelity, piracy, extinction of local languages, poor clarity and financial challenges.

**Keywords:** Folk media, folk artists, folk fans, piracy, folklore, infidelity.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The enduring nature of oramedia or folk media is best understood and appreciated when we realize that Africa remains an oppressed and suppressed continent in the shackles of imperialistic eras of: Exploration, slavery, slave trade, scramble and partition, colonialism, nationalism, independence, Neo-Colonialism, and globalization (Osho, 2010, pp. 35-65). These have brought greater challenges to the people of Africa and their means of traditional communications to endure in the face of the Western organs of mass communication and their attendant technologies to further oppress the world politically, economically, and socio-culturally. This 'mass culture' through the mass media and the new media technologies, (Louw, 2008, p.106) is described by Herbert Schiller and indeed Hafez (2007, p. 83) as 'cultural imperialism' where culturally dominant nations like United States and United Kingdom are seen to export their culture through the media, films, and entertainment rather than armed forces and dollar imperialism.

Despite the dominant nature of 'mass culture' and 'cultural imperialism', the oramedia has continued to endure. This might perhaps been further motivated by the nationalistic movements of negritude, pan Africanism, and the African personality (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1995, p. 161). But quite humbly and honestly, oramedia has been sustained through its originality and resilience in the face of neocolonialism and imperialism. Though Soyinka (2011) criticises Leopold Senghor's Negritude (Markovitz, 1969) as a nostalgic and indiscriminate glorification of the Black African past that ignores the potential benefits of modernization, as the 1986 Nobel Laureate in Literature declares that, 'a tiger does not shout its tigrity, it acts', Lassiter (2011) posits that the African mind, personality and cultural traits have come to subsist despite all odds. Hence, the African traditional media have come to subsist for their uniqueness, originality, and freshness based on the tradition and culture of the people.

In a developing country like Kenya, which is multilingual and diverse in character and where peasantry constitutes the largest segment of population, knowledge of folk media and institutions, their habits, customs, traditions and culture serve as significant tools in the process of motivating the rural masses towards development programmes launched by the government at the national, County and Sub County levels. Several authors (Krishnan, 1965; Desai, 1969; Parmar, 1973; Zaidi, 1975; Ngusie 2017 and Sanzgri, 1977) have stated that traditional media are very effective tools in rural communication process. Folk media provide important tool in the process of motivating rural masses towards accepting social changes that are being introduced

through various development agencies. Folklore in its history has been connected with national issues. The popularity of these media is due to some inherent characteristics as stated below:

- Folk songs are familiar to audiences and have positive feeling about what they hear.
- Audience can provide instant feedback to the performer unlike other media.
- The folk art forms satisfy our innate need for self-expression, for more instruction, combined with entertainment.
- The traditional media preserve and disseminate in a lively manner, the tradition and culture of our forefathers (Sarireha, 1995).
- Traditional media are more effective in rural areas because the techniques are simple and easy. This is so because they reflect the cultural ethos and are closer to the hearts of the common man in rural areas (Saxsena, 1993).

Folk arts have continued to play a meaningful role in rural areas, in educating the rural people about the consequences of social evils like alcoholism, illiteracy, untouchability, superstition, communalism, population explosion, malnutrition and insanitation, dowry and so on. Even today in the midst of hi-tech media scenario the traditional performing arts continue to be popular (Murthy, 1994). Folk media help in making the task of nation building and socio-economic development easier and acceptable to rural masses.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed ethnographic research design. It focused on the folk media of the Nambale Sub County society and data were gathered from the community's folk artists, dancers and consumers of the Kikhayo folk art and the folk media fans. Data collection method included interviews, focus group discussions and participatory observations. Participants were snowballed to saturation levels. A total of eight focus group discussions with folk media fans and sixteen interviews with folk media artists (folklorists) from Nambale Sub County were conducted.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

It is apparent that the existence of competing media industries such as Radio, Television and social media has really challenged the folk media industry. In the focus group discussions on the challenges facing folk media in Nambale Sub County folk media fans had the following sampled views:

*Very few people in the digital age would entirely depend on folk media for their information needs, they prefer blending the modern media with the traditional media, so we can't wholesomely claim that folk media is our only medium of communication. Radio, Television, books, libraries, and whatsapp present folk material to us (Focus group, Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>. 2018).*

*Most folk media depend on an individual, sometimes it is only one person who knows the content of his performances and in case he dies, he goes with all his information, as a result the oral histories of the people are distorted (Focus group, Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>. 2018).*

*The new media technologies have greatly posed a challenge to the folk media industry, most people especially the young want to be associated with it. For folk media to survive they have to integrate their industry with the new media technologies (Focus group, Oct. 9<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

Different scholars just like this study have indicated that folk media forms have limitations to integrate them into development communication strategies. Mushengyezi (2003), for instance, contends that: ...no society can certainly continue surviving on an oral system of information management when, libraries, museums hold vast stores of information in perpetuity; computers, and the world-wide web, email communication along with television transmission, radio broadcasting and the mobile telephone or 'cell phone' and other audio-visual equipment are becoming available (p.115).

The oral nature of some folk media makes it difficult for documentation. This is a challenge to the folk media especially when the person who may be having the oral form of folk mode of communication such as tales, proverbs dies or suffers health challenges.

*OI:9 Some oral forms of folk media are not inherited, in most cases when the folklore dies he or she goes with his or her proverbs or tales. In case of rituals it may be difficult to pass the procedure of conducting them as they need training for a long period of time. Again some material used in the designing of some performance costumes are not commonly available today (Oral interview. 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2018).*

Supporting the above finding from interviews, Mushengyezi (2003) underscores that the histories and cultural messages in rural areas are conveyed orally relying on individuals who can remember and pass them onto the next generation. However, oral histories may disappear when the oral historians die as there are no written documentations. Due to this, the death of a knowledgeable old person has commonly been equated with the "disappearance of a well-organized library" (Awa, 1995, p.239). This is consistent with a saying in

Nambalet that *nobulabakofumisialosiaobulatsihabi* literally; it means that when you do not have elders in your village, you do not have the blessings. Therefore, community elders are trusted as knowledgeable individuals responsible to maintain the continuity of knowledge, skills, history, language and culture of a given society known for its oral culture. However, the passing of knowledgeable elders in rural society causes a major disruption to the continuity of histories of the people as the younger generations may be inequitably conversant or unwilling to take part in preserving and transmitting it orally. Mushengyezi (2003) warns that in the process of the oral transmission of information crucial aspects of that information may suffer substantial distortion either deliberately (for example for political reasons) or inadvertently, simply from failure of memory or from unexpected early loss of life of those possessing it. Thus, it is vital to document oral histories of rural people such as in Nambale Sub County to transfer them to the next generation and apply them to development initiatives for the benefit of the current generation and posterity.

This study revealed that folk media forms cannot be equally useful for development communication purposes. Thus, folk media forms must be carefully studied from the points of view of content and characterization for their adaptation for development purposes. Participants in the focus group discussions had the following critique of the folk media:

*Not all folk media have development messages, in my view some have nothing to do with development, a traditional song like oyeeee, oyematandiko, oyeeee, oyematandiko in my opinion has nothing to do with development. As such we can't assume that everything performed traditionally is development oriented (Focus group, Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>. 2018).*

*Some folk media if not careful can contribute to societal problem such as prostitution or immorality for example a song Nonyola omukhana nang'ang'arirebiranaye (if you get a girl make love with her) (Focus group Oct. 20<sup>th</sup>. 2018).*

The above extract from participants in the focus groups clearly indicates that some folk media may not harbour development aspects at all. In the same spirit Mukhopadhyay (2007) warns that folk media forms cannot be uniformly useful for development communication purposes. Therefore, folk media forms must be carefully analyzed from the points of view of content and characterization for their adaptation for development purposes. Mukhopadhyay's arguments are related to the fact that no folk media forms can apply to specific development settings as different people can have different folk media preferences. Thus, the applicability of folk media to development programs should be consistent with the customs and beliefs of communities in a specific setting.

Concerning folk media preferences, the findings of this study have shown that rural people specifically in Nambale Sub County believed that folk songs remain more relevant compared to other folk media forms. This is based on the understanding that both communication forms have the highest entertaining, informative and educational potential. Besides, participants believed that messages through folk songs can easily diffuse into rural villages at a faster pace.

Extinction of local languages among the Nambale community is a great challenge to the folk media industry of Nambale.

*OI 1: Extinction of African Languages is a challenge in Nambale few people can fluently communicate in our local language. Financial constraints have affected our folk media industry. I find it difficult to record my works because of inadequate funds. Sometimes it takes you long to perform. It is out of these performances that we get rewards that motivates us (Oral interview, Oct. 14<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

*OI 2: The erosion of the cultural native languages in preference of foreign languages like English constitutes threats to the oral media industry in Nambale and Kenya at large. (Oral interview, Oct. 14<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

*Our native languages have been adulterated with alien dialects; Very few people can talk fluent Kikuyu for example. This is a challenge to the folk media industry since we are losing our culture and majority of the folk media performances are based in the original native set up (Focus group, Oct. 4<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

A lot of African languages are going into extinction because of the adoption of the language of colonial masters as official language. Kenya adopts English as the official language as part of the colonial heritage. This has threatened the over 100 languages being spoken in the approximate 45 million population country. Once the language of a people is taken, the whole of its culture is eroded (Osho 2011, Kumar, 2010). With the advancement in science and technology these days, the world has already become a global village and the need for a common language or some common languages among nations is fast becoming realized and cannot be overemphasized. Today, English, French and Arabic are considered international languages the first of the three being the most widely spoken in the world. Some other languages are at the doorstep of becoming international such as the Chinese Language, again, because of their development in science and technology. Meanwhile, Africa cannot afford to be left out in the scheme of world affairs even if the countries in the continent would want to keep their identity and would not want their native languages to go into extinction. A good thing, having been differently colonized by the powers that be then, most African countries have one of these three languages

as their lingua franca except perhaps a few such as Tanzania in East Africa where “the government is often praised for its successful promotion of a single indigenous language as the official national language” (Rabin, 2011). Thus, despite rhetoric and resolutions, the dominance of ex-colonial languages persists throughout the continent (Tanzania being among the notable exceptions) (Williams, 2004). This stands the many African countries in a good position to be part and parcel of the globalization process. However, this seems to be taking place at the expense of their own indigenous languages which are playing the second fiddle in their activities particularly in education and development. According to Negash (2005), the situation becomes more worrisome when it is observed that the indigenous languages are so relegated that some are at the threshold of extinction. Therefore, there can be no pretence about it that Africa and Africans are in a dilemma with respect to making use of a foreign language in the education of their citizens, giving their own languages their place of pride and remaining relevant in global affairs.

Apart from illustrating the importance of language in folk media industry and education, the response to these posers would also re-awaken the interest of scholars, particularly African scholars in the use of indigenous language as a medium of instruction. Yet, beyond questions, “the goal of appropriate language policies for effective education is worth pursuing, and while it does not behove outsiders to be too glib in their pronouncements, it is obvious to insiders and outsiders that current practices of over-reliance on alien languages are failing individuals, their communities and their countries in Africa” (Williams, 2004). In addition, against the backdrop of constraining global forces, and Africa’s internal problems (wars, repression, and general economic misery), it is the contention of this study that African languages could be the most critical element for Africa’s survival, and cultural, educational and economic development. Thus the study brings to limelight the need for Africa to “invest in this sector of ‘cultural economy’ as much as it does in the ‘material economy’ since both spheres are interrelated and impact on each other.”

Language remains the only means by which education and development is actualized and customs and tradition transmitted from one generation to another. In addition and, according to Kiplangat (2003), languages serve as important symbols of belongings, enabling different groups of people to know what ethnic groups they belong to, and what common heritages they share. This means that without an indigenous language people would lose their cultural identity and most probably their origin. Language can further be seen as one of the several inputs of the society into the school system. Instruction is given in a language shared by all. Thus, it is necessary to teach the language of instruction first in any educational programme. Language can also be defined as a generic, communication phenomenon especially in description of instruction. Language facilitates learning, through interaction with adults and collaboration with mates; children learn things they could not accomplish on their own, especially in a language. The teacher teaches, asks questions, orchestrates discussions and gives assignments via a language and through this the pupils learn to read and speak a particular language.

Piracy was also noted as one of the challenges facing folk media in Nambale Sub County:

*OI: 7 Our folk media productions have been pirated by known and unknown people all over. People play our songs without our knowledge, some duplicate them and sale for their own monetary gain. Some radio stations when they record for they will play your songs the way they feel right. You have no control over it (Oral Interview Sept. 6<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

*There is no need of buying originally recorded folk songs. I basically buy mine from cybercafé where people just get them almost free. Last week I got papa mulayi at thirty shillings only. The cyber attendant just pulled them from YouTube and burnt them on a compact disc (focus group Oct. 12<sup>th</sup>. 2018).*

A discussion about the production and distribution of folk media challenges would be incomplete without talking about piracy and how different segments of the Nambale community have responded to it. The most straightforward and transparent approach to folk media such as songs and drama distribution that the study observed was at the community radio stations. The stations have low-tech recording studios of their own, and play only those folk songs that have been recorded there. For every recording, they sign an agreement with the folk musicians that, in return for allowing the musicians to record themselves live, they obtain the rights to air that recording on their station when they choose to. In exchange, the stations provide the troupe of folk musicians with a CD of the recording that they can duplicate and share as they like. This study revealed that well-known and older folk musicians who could previously afford to sell their audio cassettes and CDs have lost a substantial portion of their potential earnings due to the widespread sale of pirated recordings.

*OI: 8 People have taken advantage of our poverty and recorded us without our knowledge. They sale our recorded works to people at a throw away prices (Oral Interview Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

Lesser known musicians do not have the notoriety or resources to obtain recordings in the first place. As a result, the folk music market is currently dominated by local individuals and businesses that use low-cost recording devices to obtain recordings from live performances and sell them at low cost to interested listeners, almost always without permission from the folk musicians. When asked about challenges facing folk media

industry, several folk musicians shared their views on this practice and on piracy in general. The strongest opinion recorded by this study against piracy was from one of the musicians in Bukhayo East ward who said:

*OI 8: The voice should have a price (Oral Interview Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. 2018).*

When asked to share their views on how this practice made them feel about their music – the fact that their Compact Disks (CDs) were reproduced without their earning the revenue from the sales – the general view was one of passive acceptance. A folk artist said:

*OI 9 “What can we do if a robber comes, steals our goods and runs away? It is not in our control (Oral Interview Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

When asked if they (the folk artists) approved of the practice, they appeared convinced that it was unfair and challenging, but nevertheless, their primary interest was still in spreading the word of the great poets and saints from the Nambale folk traditions, whether or not they received remuneration for their art. As a result, many of the folk artists’ own opinions about piracy were ambivalent. One such artist (from Mungatsi) offered a refreshingly a positive outlook:

*OI 5: “There is no solution for piracy. You just can’t stop people from copying your folk productions and the law doesn’t work in this case. This kind of access to folk songs for the common man shows that folk productions are priceless. Now we can listen to one thousand songs by paying just Kshs. 100. Do you think we are paying for the folk songs? The shopkeeper is not charging for folk songs; he is charging for the software in which he has invested (Oral Interview Sept. 18<sup>th</sup>. 2018).*

Piracy leads to illegal but wider distribution of folk productions and therefore also serves to extend the popularity and fame of many musicians. This could be an opportunity for increasing the remuneration for folk artists through live performances– even for up and coming folk musicians who are not already well known. Echoing this sentiment, one Bukhayo West artist said:

*OI3: Folk Singers are still on the safe side because when people record our folksongs on their mobile devices at any live performance, it spreads like fire. People get to know about our good performance only through these devices and we get publicity as well as more shows to perform at. On the one hand, the CD and cassette business has gone down, but on the other, the demand for our live performances is rising (Oral Interview Sept. 12<sup>th</sup>. 2018)*

In general, illegal duplication of media content (‘doubling’) appears to be widespread and socially accepted in Nambale Sub County. Folk artists did not offer any resistance in sharing the details of their business with the researcher. On the contrary, they were proud of showing off their large media libraries and how they obtained them. Listeners also benefited from cheap and ubiquitous access to folk content. Our interviews results with artists show that it is not one or the other, but both money and fame that are important to folk artists. While they would certainly like to receive remuneration for their art, they do appreciate the patronage they receive on account of widespread (but illegal) distribution of their works. Kumar (2010) supports this kind of perspective arguing that it promotes the folk media industry.

Traditional restrictions from community elders have also been a challenge to the folk media industry in Nambale Sub County:

*Folk media artists have been limited by traditional restrictions. You cannot just pop up and start performing especially if you are a specialist in administering rituals. No one will allow you. There must be a senior traditionalist to mentor you. In case you ignore the cultural setup you may be declared a social misfit. (Focus group, Oct.13<sup>th</sup>2018)*

*OI3: As an artist you can’t just come from nowhere, you must get the blessings of the elders for to start performing some rituals or cultural songs. Sometimes if you don’t follow protocol the spirits may be annoyed with you and that could lead to destruction (Oral interview 12<sup>th</sup>. Sept 2018).*

The segmentary lineage system which is an inherent character in most parts of Africa is complimentary to the development of a central government. To explain this, one may stray into what Nadel (1978), refers to as “ideological history” which is not as simple but needs patient analysis. Traditional societies have remained ardent to some invented frames due to long lines of accumulated beliefs that derive from the supernatural: the divinity of kings, that his person is sacred, touching is forbidden as it is said that white blood ran in his veins, the fact that he is immovable on a raised platform is substantiated by his elaborate existence. Comparative studies of traditional societies show a radical system that makes the king the centre of all important activities. The citizens have vested interest in his administration as evident vehicle for transfer of rights and privileges. Due to effective interpersonal nature of the society, spheres of intercultural milieu exist. There is the market place - where people engage in buying and selling and interact in the process, a political system traits depicted by rituals, cults, ceremonies and deities (Onwuejeogwu, 2007). For example, the Benin and Yoruba who invented their kings from Ile-Ife and gave the state a divine origin and sanction, made awesomely powerful the position of the Oba and Oni. In fact, the Benin monarchy belongs to a moral community that is cast on stone - cannot be disintegrated by any force. Perhaps, such influence may exist in other city-states and nowhere else.

While this is not an all-conclusive factor in social mobilization, it is imperative that in both literate and pre-literate societies in Africa, social mobilization is mainly fostered by this rich caste structure (Vasina 1968).

Financial challenges were also reported and noted among the various folk artists interviewed in Nambale Sub County:

*OI 6: Sometimes you want to go perform but because of financial constraints you don't go and perform. Transportation of performance instruments is very difficult because of inadequate funds. In case you have some sponsors most of them just sponsor you partially. Traditional performance regalia are also very expensive (Oral interview Sept. 10th, 2018).*

*OI 5: Most folk artists have issues with funds, even transporting performance equipment to the scene is a problem, buying performance costumes is also a problem. (Oral interview Sept. 9th, 2018).*

*Our folk media artists are really struggling financial, we as fans we just enjoy their performances but we are of very little help when it comes to mobilizing resources for their production (Focus group, Oct. 20th 2018).*

Just like the other forms of media, folk media industry is currently affected by financial challenges. For good production to take place artists need funds to hire or buy good performance instruments, funds are also vital in motivation of both the performers and even hire fans sometimes. Therefore just like it is the case with modern media, traditional media are currently struggling with mobilising financial resources for their daily operation.

Despite the effectiveness of some folk media for development communication, different scholars cautions against an extensive reliance on folk media for rural development communication. Daudu (2009, pp. 22-23) in his study found that irrespective of their effectiveness to convey agricultural messages, folk media forms should be carefully used due to their lack of reliability, high organising expenses and poor clarity of messages. However, the findings of Daudu and this study contradict with some of the widely-reported qualities of folk media as being cost-effective, accessible, and credible among others (Mushengyezi, 2003; Nigusie 2010; Panford 2001). Bame (2005, pp.81-82) evaluating the significance of comic plays in social change in Ghana argues that folk media forms are criticised for: first, what he called a “one-shot approach,” implying that the comic plays are expensive to design and have failed to involve members of the target populations in the creation and performances of the folk drama.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To use folk media effectively the major problems of lack of fidelity, high organizing expenses and poor clarity must be tackled. Notwithstanding the problems highlighted, folk media have proved to be effective, less expensive and liked by people in Nambale Sub County. There is probably the need for close collaboration between development agents, traditional and new rural communicators to revive or strengthen the traditional communication system by reducing the major problems highlighted to stimulate people's participation in their production and performance..

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