



**TOWN CRIER AND RURAL INFORMATION DISSEMINATION IN NIGERIA: THE
BAYELSA STATE EXPERIENCE**

By

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ABSTRACT

Information for sustainable development is seen as a resource and ingredient in the developmental process in rural Africa. Bayelsa State of Nigeria is predominantly rural and mostly of an illiterate populace. Much needed information can only be meaningful to the people if it is well packaged and disseminated in the way and manner they are used to. The role of the town crier in disseminating information in the manner consonant with the rural dwellers' understanding has been recognized as the major medium through which Government can reach the people adequately. With the use of information and communication technology (ICT), town criers are now able to reach their targeted audience from a central point (radio house), instead of pounding the bits to cover the entire community as in the past. The paper highlighted the role of the town crier; qualities of the town crier; activities of the town crier; the Bayelsa State situation; State Government's use of town criers; and concluded that town crying as a major means of information provision and dissemination is still very relevant in this modern information age in the 21st century. The paper finally recommended among others that Town Criers should be gainfully employed in the civil service and Librarians in the public libraries serve as intermediary and partner the Town Criers.

Keywords: *Information, Town crier, Rural communities, Information provision, Information dissemination, Bayelsa State*

Introduction

In Africa, rural dwellers rely heavily on facts and opinions provided and received during the course of daily life. People using such facts and opinions generate more information, some of which are communicated to others during discourse, by instructions, in letters and documents, and through other media (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2007). Information dissemination and accessibility have reduced the world to a global village. The term information in this context refers to facts and opinions provided and received during the course of daily life: one obtains information directly from

others, from mass media, from electronic data banks, and from all sorts of sources in the environment (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2007). Information dissemination here is seen as the purposive spreading or giving out of information for objective reasons. Africa, like the rest of the world, is experiencing change in all aspects of life: from basic cultural values to technology, which has changed the mode of communication. In Africa, there are different methods of providing information for the people. These are the traditional African methods and the modern and technologically driven methods. The Town Crier is a key player in the traditional African method (Etebu, 2009).

Craner (nd) posited that Town Criers go way back in history to when people in towns and villages where mainly illiterate. The Crier was the latter-day newsman, reading the proclamations and news to all in the village square. Concurring, Appleton (2015) stated that historically town criers - or *Bellmen* as they were sometimes called - were the original newsmen. The first town criers were the Spartan Runners in the early Greek Empire and as the Roman Conquest spread through Europe the position increased in importance until it became a position of the court. In England, the first recorded use of Town Criers was in the year 1066, when following the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror had men go out and announce his victory in all of the local towns. The history of the Town Crier is somewhat blurred prior to the Norman Invasion in 1066, however they were featured on the Bayeux Tapestry so they must have been about prior to the battle in 1066 (Shears, 2010).

As England colonized the world, the position of the town crier spread with it. Before people could read, town criers brought the news to the people, and served as spokesmen for the King. Criers were regularly used after this by the ruling King or Queen to inform all the citizens of their orders and decrees. To this day old English law still protects Criers from being Hindered or Heckled whilst carrying out their duties (Craner, nd). The role played by Town Criers was so significant that The Ontario Guild of Town Criers (nd) averred that for the most part the citizens of the towns relied on the crier for the latest information, be it good or bad news. These could include Famine, War, Feast, Taxation Changes, etc. as there was no radio or TV in olden Days. Continuing, it stated that Bells were not the only attention getting device. In Holland a Gong was the instrument of choice for many, and in France they used a Drum, or a Hunting Horn.

Town Crying is not exclusive to the shores Rome and England, many other countries including Australia, New Zealand, America, Canada, South Africa, other Common Wealth countries and some European countries have Town Criers. Africa is primordially traditional and their mode of communication is basically oral. The town crier is one whose duty is to transmit information to the populace from mainly the traditional rulers, clan heads and sometimes individuals. He uses a sound making object (gong) to rouse his audience before delivering the message or information he has for them. In each community, there is usually one major town crier responsible to the ruler, to prevent confusion. In a predominantly illiterate rural community, information is communicated to the people by the town crier at no cost to the recipients in their local dialects.

Nigeria is a country where ICT is speedily gaining grounds. Global System of Mobile communication (GSM) is owned and used by most people in urban and rural dwellings. The Federal Government is providing GSM to rural farmers, radio and TV stations and being established, newspaper houses are opening, GSM service providers making Internet connectivity accessible to smart phone users, all geared towards information dissemination to target audiences and recipients. In the face of all these, the Town Crier still thrives in its traditional role of information dissemination to the local people in a manner they are well used to and accepted. This paper highlights the quality, role and importance of town criers in traditional African methods of providing and disseminating information to rural dwellers for sustainable economic, political, communal, and social development in the presence of modern information dissemination mechanisms in Bayelsa State.

Brief on Bayelsa State

Bayelsa State was created from the old Rivers State on 1st October 1996. It is located in the major oil and natural gas producing area of the Niger Delta. The name Bayelsa was derived from three acronyms BALGA for Brass Local Government Area, YELGA for Yenagoa Local Government Area and SALGA for Sagbama Local Government Area (Alagoa, 1999). Initially divided into eight local government areas, today it has thirty two localities twenty-four of them created by the state government in December 1999. The State is divided into three (3) federal senatorial districts namely Bayelsa Central (Yenagoa, Southern Ijaw and Kolokuma/Opokuma LGAs), Bayelsa East (Brass, Nembe and Ogbia LGAs) and Bayelsa West (Sagbama and Ekeremo LGAs). Bayelsa has a total land area of 21,110 square kilometers, located within latitude 04°22' west and 06°45' east. It is bounded on the east and west by Rivers and Delta States respectively and on the south by the Atlantic Ocean (Adeshola, 2005). It has a population of about 1.7 million people placing it among the least populated states of the federation according to the 2006 National Population Census figure of 1,703,358 people spread among 8 LGAs. The capital of the state is Yenagoa.

The State capital, Yenagoa, and major cities like Nembe, Amassoma, Odi, Kaiama, Sagbama, and Brass still exhibit features of true rural communities, nineteen years after the State was created. Activities of town criers, diviners, and others still thrive in a state where there are four radio stations (Glory FM, Royal FM, Ray Power and Creek FM) and three television stations (NTA, AIT and Gloryland TV) situated in and around the capital, and covers the entire state. There is a State public library, two individually owned public libraries (E. J. Alagoa Public Library, Biogbolo and Azaiki Public Library, Amarata) and a State owned museum in the State capital. These modern information providers are of little or no significance to rural dwellers and host communities in the area of information dissemination for sustainable development (Etebu, 2009).

The Town Crier in his Role

The town crier is the link between the traditional governing council of any community and the people. He is not a member of cabinet of the traditional ruler but he conveys the decisions of the council that are necessary for the people to know so that the people will be carried along in all decisions made concerning them. In his role as the spokesman of the traditional governing council, he provides members of the community vital information. Occasionally, the town crier could be called to attend the traditional governing council meetings where vital decisions are taken, but generally, information are often conveyed through him to the community. Prior to the introduction of a formal police force, the Town Crier, being a true, trusted royalist, was also often empowered to uphold the law. Town Criers or Heralds as they were known in earlier times were considered to be sacrosanct. An assault on a Town Crier was regarded as a treasonable act, as the crier spoke with the voice of the King. Town Criers were protected by law. "Don't shoot the messenger" was a very real command back in those days. To this day, any Town Crier in the British Commonwealth is protected under old English law that they are not to be hindered or heckled while performing their duties (History of the Town Crier, nd).

Qualities of a Town Crier

The town crier is in most cases appointed by the tradition ruler, or through inheritance from family lineage. The person must have retentive memory to retain instructions given and recall them at different times and places where he has to make the announcements. He should have a clear voice, courageous and effective in the use of his dialect. The town crier must equally be resonant in voice, which is, he could be heard even in remote corners of the village. He should be a man of perseverance and patience since he has to go too far distances at odd times. He should be able to respond on time if he is called upon. He should know the culture of his people and be able to interpret it to fit the objectives of his community. He should not only be respected and revered but also regarded as authoritative and credible

source of information. Finally, the sound from his communication medium; the gong (wooden or metal), or the drum should be decodable appropriately and receive attention from the audiences to whom they are addressed. In most cases, the town crier is always a matured and respected man.

Activities of the Town Crier

The town crier passes the information when people would have returned from their different locations; taken their supper, usually before bedtime or at the early hours of the day between 5am and 6am. The town crier disseminates information on dates of festivals, communal works, visits of an important person to the community such as the Governor, Commissioner, Local Government Chairman, Political rally etc. Though, in some emergency occasions, the town crier could be summoned at any time of the day as the occasion demands to pass emergency information. For example, if there is an attack on the community by a wild animal, the town crier could be called to summon all able bodied men to kill such wild animal before any damage is done to the community.

The role of the town crier could be supervisory on some occasions. For instance, in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, in Igbo land, during communal works to keep communities clean, the town crier will beat his metal gong at dawn to summon the people to the work site. When the work commences, he sounds his gong in a rhythmic tone to encourage the people to work hard. He determines when work should stop, acting on instruction from the traditional council. He recommends those to be fined to the governing council for one offence or the other committed at the work site. The media through which he alerts members of the community before he passes his information could be a metal or wooden gong or drum (Enwereonye, 2008).

In the general context, the credibility of the town crier simply means that he tells his audience the truth. It is credibility that defines the relationship between the communicator and the recipient or what is communicated and it is untold strategy that controls the implementation and success in the operation and landscape of mass communication. The communicator is conferred with communicative competence and prestige when credibility is guaranteed (Enwereonye, 2008). Again, "know your audience" is the first rule of practical communication. In essence, the success of a communicator in the dissemination of information depends on the audience. In the context of communication theory, the audience is the public that is dispersed in its social set-up (Gamble and Gamble 2002). Audience is in this case, a public made up of independent persons or groups of persons who are more or less separated in time and space. The audience of the town crier is his own community.

Suffice it to say that the town crier is therefore, the most reliable source of authentic information as regards the dissemination of information on the affairs of the community. In this regard he is very important to the smooth running of the administrative set up of the community. He is a man of public relations and also for external affairs through the town crying message system. He is both the channel of communication and the communicator. This dualism of roles explains further his characteristic as a powerful organ of information in the village or community. On rare occasions, when the need arises, women are also involved as town criers in some villages or communities. This role is mostly performed on issues concerning them. For instance, if they are to have an important meeting or if a serious offence is committed in the community and the women need to intervene in the matter. This role is occasional and not as prominent and conspicuous as that of the male town crier.

Bayelsa State Situation

In many of the communities, especially Amassoma in Southern Ijaw, Odi in Kolokuma/Opokuma, Ogbia in Ogbia, Nembe in Nembe, Ekeremor in Ekeremor, Sagbama in Sagbama, Okpoma in Brass and Biseni in Yenagoa Local Government Areas, town criers are of two categories; the major one is controlled by the traditional ruler (Amanana-owe). His constituency is the entire town or community. The second is by the Compound chief (Pelenana-owe). These second categories disseminate information within their immediate jurisdiction i.e. to affected quarters and compounds. Colonialism brought with it

foreign ways of information provision and dissemination, which were beneficial to the continent in many ways. Electricity brought remarkable change in the way town criers go about their business. Many rural communities of the State have no electricity. The few communities with electricity, connected to the national grid, are now used to irregular power supply as a way of life.

Majority of the communities in the State (with electricity or not) have keyed into the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in information dissemination in their communities. Electric power generator (especially a small one [one-man-career] of between N10,000.00 to N15,000.00 or about a \$80) serve as substitute. A microphone in a central position (radio house) and loudspeakers placed at different locations in the communities ensure that town criers cover a wider range without moving from their positions. Matters handled and settled by traditional courts, council of elders, and chiefs are communicated to the entire community. A loser in a case must have to pay to the radio house operator (town crier) a fee for the decisions reached to be announced to the entire community. Obituaries, gatherings, meetings, kings' (Ebenana-owei & Amanana-owei) messages and other announcements are disseminated through this medium. Notable communities where these loudspeakers can easily be seen are Amassoma and Otuan in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, Ogobri and Sagbama town in Sagbama Local Government Area and Agudama community in Yenagoa Local Government Area, representing the three federal senatorial constituencies in the State.

Use of Town Criers by the Bayelsa State Government

The Government of Bayelsa State stated in September 2008 that thenceforth it would use town criers to disseminate government information to rural communities, although the State radio and television stations had appropriate equipment for their broadcasts. Why did the State Government decide to use town criers in this modern information age? In Africa, information is viewed as a vital resource for the uplift and development of the people both in rural and urban dwellings. Boon (1992) and Camble (1994) noted that the absence of information may impede development. Information that is disseminated effectively to its users will liberate them from the shackles of ignorance, misconception, economic stagnation, social unrest and political instability.

African culture is basically oral. In an oral culture, information is stored in people's memories and people with good memories play a vital role in storing and transferring information. The African rural population is mostly illiterate, and they get information this way at no cost. This oral exchange of information indicates that rural dwellers may be able to relate to information exchanged in the way they are accustomed to (Meyer, 2005). This is still the situation in both urban and rural communities of Bayelsa State.

Outside the oral tradition, information is medium dependent and must be well packaged in order to be used. The receivers of the information should know how to use that particular format, or the information will be inaccessible and useless (Meyer, 2005). Okoola (1996) averred that traditional indicators play a very vital role in information provision. Apart from the traditional indicators, there are other ways in which information is provided. Most notable is the oral communication pattern. In almost all rural communities, town criers and their activities are noticeable. They use wooden or metal gongs or drums to stir up the people and deliver their messages orally. Lack of governmental information in rural environments remains a problem. Should this situation not have accounted for the Bayelsa State Government taking this decision in the face of modern and more civilized way of information dissemination? It seems modern civilized method of information provision has not been useful to rural communities.

Hence, Alegbeleye (1998) opined that "colonial powers came to a continent that had indigenous knowledge systems communicated through the oral/aural mode. It is clear from available research and from the experience of library professionals that:

- i. rural communities have information needs that are not satisfied by existing library services;

- ii. information needs differ from one locality to another depending on existing socio-economic and political conditions; and
 - iii. information must be directly relevant to the lives of the people if it is to be used
- information transfer must simulate existing indigenous mode of communicating information.”

It is obvious that the Government saw information as a resource that can help solve problems in a development context. The rural areas of Bayelsa in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, is badly and negatively affected with lack of adequate information for sustainable developmental growth and good governance. The reason for this situation can be ascribed to poverty in the mist of abundant natural resources, illiteracy, militancy and government negligence.

Conclusion

Information is medium dependent and must be packaged in order to be used. The receivers of the information must know how to use that particular format, or the information will be inaccessible and useless. Africa's oral culture permeates. This means that town crying as a major means of information provision is still very relevant in this modern information age. The global revolution in information provision and dissemination means that town criers are able to function more effectively, using modern information and communication technology (ICT). The fact that communities and majority of the population of Bayelsa State are predominantly rural, show how important the issue of information dissemination for sustainable development is. Therefore, Government resolves to use the services of town criers in information dissemination. This resolution pivoted the role of the town crier, since the various communities will receive the information provided in a way understandable and acceptable to them. This is keeping in line today, with many cities and towns in Europe as they are reviving the position of Town Crier as a visible link to the past.

Recommendations

In order to enhance access to information by rural dwellers, it is hereby recommended that:

- i. The Government should provide and maintain communication support infrastructures if the use of Town Criers for disseminating government provided information have come to stay. Electronic gadgets can be used to record, play or broadcast recorded information at interval to relay the same message.
- ii. The State Government should formally and officially employ existing Town Criers into the civil service, under the State Ministry of Information.
- iii. Since majority of the Town Criers in the big towns are operating from Radio Houses, using ICTs to boost their performance, the cost of running a power generator might hinder the smooth flow of information dissemination sometimes. The State Government should introduce the use of solar power to cushion the effect of power outages.
- iv. The Government should take seriously the training and retraining of Town Criers to properly handle government information being disseminated to the recipients to avoid distortion.
- v. Remuneration of Town Criers should be the responsibility of the State Government and not left in the hands of the traditional rulers.
- vi. Librarians in public libraries should be brought into the party to partner, act as intermediary or used as Town Criers in governmental information dissemination to the rural communities.

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