

ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION

Qu'y a-t-il de plus étranger au monde moderne de la communication que la "communication traditionnelle" avec ses mythes, ses récits, ses proverbes, ses rites, ses danses, son théâtre, ses ornements, ses sculptures... Pourtant au coeur même de la communication moderne dominée par le pouvoir de l'argent, du divertissement, de l'utilitarisme émergent avec de plus en plus d'acuité des revendications en faveur d'une participation des publics, en particulier des minorités, et d'un supplément de sens et de repères qui permettraient à l'homme moderne de se situer dans sa société. Justement n'étaient-ce pas là les fonctions premières de la communication traditionnelle ?

The modern means of mass communication, press, radio, TV, telephone etc., are an integral part of today's modern world, without which life can hardly be imaginable.

But how did communication actually work before mass media came into being, and before the spreading of the written word? Taking a look at other cultures and our own past, opens up interesting fields of information.

1. It is unanimously recognised that communication is an essential element of each epoch and every society. Traditional forms of communication are for instance myths; story-telling; songs; proverbs; religious rituals; artistic, musical, dance and theatrical elements, as well as ornaments depicted on pottery, textiles and wood.

These forms differ greatly from each other, being characterised - among others - by their own particular society, and by economical, social and religious characteristics. Myths give witness to reflections and observations of nature and human beings. They convey a view of life, depicting the position of human being. On this basis, values and standards are shared and rules laid down concerning behaviour towards nature and relationships between men.

2. Traditional communication fulfils several functions: just to name a few:

a) The passing on of knowledge and experience (agricultural, social, botanical, meteorological, etc).

One example: In many parts of America where maize is cultivated, a well known myth tells of three sisters called Bean, Maize and Pumpkin: These three were constantly together, helping each other and fighting against enemies. These plants were cultivated together in one field. (In some areas where modern farming methods are still unknown, this method is still practiced today). It is only a few years ago that modern agricultural science proved that the combined cultivation of the three above mentioned vegetables is most favourable for growth, for the supply of nutrients and for defence reactions to disease and pests. I.e. Ancient experience in form from myths are handed down from generation to generation.

Animal myths - dance and representation - played an important role for the hunting and tribal folk, as it was necessary to know and understand the habits of the animals. Even their language gives evidence of this: For instance an extensive vocabulary was developed in relation to hunting, tracking and bagging of prey. All this resulted not only in the actual capturing of the animals, but also to ensure and protect the continuity of these creatures. Rules and regulations existed about when, how or how many animals were slaughtered. Closed seasons were indicated by taboos, the breaching of which was punished by sanctions. In this way an over-exploitation of natural resources was overcome. (Today only a small number of hunting and tribal folk still exist, as their survival is dangerously threatened by the ever-increasing advance of modern civilization).

b) One further aspect of traditional communication is the conveyance of moral concepts: moral and social standards such as legal patterns which rule the co-existence of human being, their dealings with natural resources, and regulates their behaviour towards foreigners.

Examples are to be found in stories, songs and proverbs, in which virtues are rewarded and weaknesses punished. (What is to be understood by virtue or weakness is laid down by the respective society on grounds of its human and worldly concept).

c) Other myths and tales give the answer to questions of vital significance to human being, such as the sense in grief, of illness and death. These helped - and still help - by overcoming such situations.

d) Information concerning historical events concerning society as a whole, or ancestral tales serve to form the identity of a person or a society, and strengthen their solidarity.

Activities which from a utilitarian point of view seem meaningless (e.g. story-telling, dancing, singing, performing of religious ceremonies), play however a not unimportant role in the functioning of social order and the ensuring of economic foundations. In this way traditional

communications serve finally the survival of the group itself. Traditional forms of communication are ritually repeated on special occasions, e.g. of annual or lifetime celebrations. In this way they renew and prove their worth and experience, and in so doing are communicated to the younger generation.

Traditional communication forms are a part of the culture of the relevant society. They are familiar to the members, are used by them and understood by all. Very often they take the form of social events (e.g. parties, celebrations).

3. In comparison, in modern industrial society the content of knowledge and entertainment often falls apart; knowledge is often reduced to intellectual knowledge, while entertainment not seldom lacks a spiritual background.

References to own culture and the connection between the communication content and own vital matters are - in this age of mass media - no longer given: Programmes are produced where financial backing is available, with the result that both Indian children in the Andes, as well as slum-dwellers in the large cities of India, are - via foreign television - presented with programmes which not only give no answers to their problems, but wherein lie also the danger of foreign cultural infiltration.

4. These dangers and deficiencies however can be overcome through appropriate use of modern communication means: In this respect it is decisive that in all peoples and groups, increasing interest is shown in the use of modern media and to take part in respective training programmes. On the one hand this gives the possibility of authentically portraying the elements of traditional culture (e.g. entertainment, dance, song, etc.), through modern media. In this way, members of the respective cultures discover that they also are seen and heard, and their culture respected.

On the other hand, today in all corners of the world, modern cultural basis organisations are becoming noticed. They themselves produce print- radio and video programmes, and in this way support the efforts of NGO's and other

groups in a responsibly fashioned present and future. Those on the edge of society are no longer just passive consumers of programmes and information from a foreign world. They now have a mouthpiece through which they can make known their own perspectives.

As with traditional communication means, the connection between life and survival is given once again here, as well as the active participation and involvement of all groups in the task of solving problems. Communication is no longer a one-way-street ruled by a dominant society. It would be desirable if this type of media work could find its rightful place in society as a whole at national and international level, as also here the number of contributions received "from the South" are steadily diminishing.

5. Some questions must be raised here:

On grounds of the complicated technology of modern electronic media, only people having a respective training are able to use these facilities. These are in the majority the younger generation, predominantly men. Here the question arises to what extent is the possibility for women, children and the elderly to participate in this type of work, in so far as they can bring it into perspective?

It must be further considered that the relatively high costs of modern media considerably limit participation. Who has this possibility? How are they financed? (Is outside financing necessary?)

As a rule, traditional communication methods include all members of society, and function without high costs. It could be examined to what extent these communication means are still maintained, whether they can be revived and made fruitful for today's requirements, e.g. street theatre, songs, religious principles. Since the value of traditional communication methods have been strongly recognised by human being in the past, it would certainly be relevant to examine and encourage the above mentioned possibilities.

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