‘Watch my back and I watch yours’: Beyond Habermas’ public sphere concept in
democratic and participatory dimensions of pre-colonial Shona society public spaces

Lyton Ncube and Keyan G. Tomaselli, University of Johannesburg

Abstract
Debates on communication media and democracy including in Africa are largely anchored in
the western Habermasian public sphere concept. Studies employing indigenous African
communication platforms and symbols are scarce, prompting Zimbabwean philosopher
Tafataona Mahoso to argue that while Africans have a philosophy, we have become ‘illiterate’
such that we cannot read our constructions and symbols. Thus, this article broadens discussions
on participatory communication practices and democratic principles by engaging pre-colonial
Zimbabwe communication and solidarity relational philosophies of Dariro and Dare
(ubiquitous circle) largely located in traditional Shona societies. The philosophical democratic
dimensions of these platforms are discussed in relation to Habermas’ public sphere theory. We
show that despite western thought generally regarding the non-West as a place of antiquarian
traditions and unprocessed data, pre-colonial indigenous African communication systems were
characterized by democratic participation, agency and public contest; at times beyond
democratic practices and principles espoused by the Habermasian public sphere.

Keywords
participatory communication

Dare

Dariro

Shona society
Introduction

Responding to critiques of western normative communication theory, a number of recent studies have sought to balance the epistemological playing fields by ‘de-westernizing’, and subsequently ‘de-colonizing’ research. Such approaches are, however, reactive, and tend rather to either extend western epistemological footprints into previously neglected research sites (e.g., Africa) (see e.g., Curran and Park 2003). Or, they have sought to dismiss western thought in totality (Chinweizu 1999). Yet others have identified middle paths starting from a critical engagement with western concepts (see e.g., Willems 2014; Tomaselli and Mboti 2013; Wright 2016) but none of these actually develop or critique African assumptions about communication theory and practice as do, for example, Blankenberg (1999) and Tomaselli (2016). These studies, however, largely examine broader issues, in comparison to this study, which focuses on a specific set of practices from one particular sign community.

This article deploys traditional indigenous Shona1 institutions and protocols of participatory communication – *Dare* and *Dario* to engage normative (western) participatory communication and democracy models, especially the Habermasian public sphere. At denotative level, *Dario* means a place or group arrangement in which people sit facing one another and are able to see one another. It also means the physical space defined as a centre by the sitting persons (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). However, at connotative level, *Dario* becomes densely rich. It is a place for considering one another and one another’s contributions, ideas, needs, aspirations and concerns; the place of looking forward together; the place of collective morale, mutual confidence building, faith and optimism built on consensus, trust and reconciliation of otherwise, initially, diverse views moulded into one
position through processes of *kushaura* and *kutsinhira* (call and response) (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Moreover, depending on the degree of formality and authority accorded to it at the particular level, the *Dariro* becomes the *Dare* (Gombe 1998; Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). However, the word *Dare* or *Chivara* was largely associated with a traditional sitting space for men in pre-colonial Shona society. Our examination goes beyond this space. Rather, we also examine *Dare* as a forum, a gathering, or a court (from family level, usually presided over by *madzitete*-aunties, village heads and by Chiefs/Kings). The two platforms can also be conceptualized as ‘alternative media’. This is because ‘any media which fall outside the formal corporate mainstream media and embodies the Gramscian notion of counterhegemonic is alternative media’ (Ndlela 2009: 87).

There is a scarcity of articles in communication studies deploying traditional indigenous African systems of communication to interrogate western communication models. As observed by Ndlela (2007: 326) ‘media theories in Africa, especially international communication theory, have not yet moved beyond the question of information flow and the media imperialism debate that characterized the New World Information and Communication debates’. Some exceptions are (Kerr 2001; Donnelly 2001; Kasoma 1996), amongst others. Ziegler and Asante (1992) contend that no understanding of contemporary philosophies of mass communication in Africa can be possible without a full appreciation of the role of traditional aspects of communication. It is critical to ‘remember that Africans were communicating long before Europeans entered the continent; indeed, long before Arabs came to the northern part of the continent’ (Ziegler and Asante 1992: 5). African traditional established forms of communication are therefore, vital in discussing normative (western) communication models. All ‘practices of human communication are derived from a culture base. African communication is no different’ (Nhiwatiwa 1929: 7). Whereas people in urban areas in Zimbabwe depend on mass media as sources of communication, in rural areas they depend on
oral interpersonal communication (Rusike 1990). However, Rusike (1990) did not go beyond this observation to interrogate western theories in the context of such African communication practices. Importantly, Rusike did not examine how that could have been a result of the enduring nature of African oral culture, instead choosing to argue that it was due to a lack of resources to purchase formal media products. While this is sound, it is arguable that it is not the only cause of such a scenario. Mahoso (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) argues that while Africans have a philosophy, we have become illiterate such that we cannot read our constructions and symbols. Thus, we deploy Zimbabwe as a case study to debate communication and democracy issues in Africa. ‘A study of democratization processes is inevitable a study of access to communicative spaces’ (Ndlela 2009: 88). The discussion is located in the framework of participatory communication, democracy and the public sphere.

However, studies employing African traditional communication systems to critique western communication and democracy models are few and far between. Here, we broaden the understanding of participatory communication and democracy through an analysis of communicative practices in oral traditional communicative spaces Dare and Dario in the Shona societies. We demonstrate communicative practices in indigenous spaces (Dare and Dario) which are consonant with the Habermasian public sphere. Also highlighted are democratic aspects in traditional communicative spaces precluded by Habermas’ public sphere. We acknowledge earlier engagements with the Habermasian public sphere, counter public sphere and citizen-based democracy on the basis of participation in a Zimbabwean context. For instance, Ndlela (2009) examines alternative media such as pirate radio stations and online news sites in terms of their contribution to the political public sphere in Zimbabwe in the
context of the country’s recurring socio-economic and political crisis where the state maintains a stranglehold on the mainstream media. Submissions by Ndlela (2007, 2009) on Zimbabwe’s public sphere and counter public spheres therefore, lay important foundation for our exploration.

In order to improve our clarity on the philosophical underpinnings and symbolic dimensions of Dariro and Dare in the African society, we conducted in-depth interviews with Tafataona Mahoso one of the key proponents of the Dariro philosophy in Zimbabwe. We also got insights on the subject from Mahoso’s column – ‘Homecoming’ in The Patriot, a state controlled newspaper in Zimbabwe. However, Mahoso’s discussions on Dariro in newspapers revolve around Zimbabwe’s Chimurenga liberation rituals such as the pungwe (night vigil) and its teachings; Zimbabwe’s land redistribution programme; legitimizing the 2017 military intervention which led to the resignation of long-time, president Robert Mugabe; the recurring Zimbabwean economic crisis and its subsequent contribution to chihwindi (touting) and mitsara (queuing) cultures. The chihwindi (touting) and mitsara (queuing) cultures have, as Mahoso argues, undermined values and principles of the African philosophy of the ubiquitous circle-Dariro. Indeed, Mahoso’s analysis is welcome and lays critical foundation for this study and future analyses of African relational philosophies and communication. However, Mahoso’s discussions have been limited to newspaper articles, yet they have potential to make significant contributions to academic discussions on African communication systems and democracy. We thus expand on Mahoso’s discussions of Dariro, provide nuanced analysis of Dariro, and Dare engaging them with the western liberal democratic model – Habermasian public sphere.
We are wary of epistemic challenges associated with critiquing Habermas public sphere concept using traditional African communication platforms. For instance, Comaroff and Comaroff (2013: 16) argue, ‘Western thought has, from the first, regarded the non-West as a place of antiquarian traditions and unprocessed data’. As Ndlela (2009: 88) argues ‘many critics would dispute the existence in Africa of a Habermasian public sphere—that communicative space in which private people come together as a public’. In light of this, comparing perceived ‘primitive’ African cultures to western civilization is akin to epistemic disobedience. Our intention here is not to discredit Habermas’ public sphere thesis, but to reveal African organic experiences and practices, which must also be acknowledged for bearing democratic principles. We concede that comparing the two is a mammoth task given differences in circumstances in which the two spaces existed and purposes they served. We are also aware of the almost taken-for granted acceptance of Habermas’ views, which have essentially, made a critique of the concept non-commonsensical especially from an African perspective. It is precisely because of this almost deity like status of Habermas’ theory that this study is significant.

Habermas’ public sphere concept

Habermas’ public sphere concept is one of the most discussed topics in media and communication studies. The theory deals with the media and democracy matrix. The theory is multi-disciplinary and has been used to critique the media, civil society, universities and parliaments. The public sphere concept is mainly used for performance evaluation especially concerning the media’s political functions and democratic obligations (Holub 1991; Price 1995). Normatively, the media/public sphere must be an open forum for all and sundry regardless of race, class, ethnicity, religion or creed. In fact, the public sphere thrives from the
plurality and diversity of opinion, thus creating a marketplace of ideas (Habermas 1962). The public sphere is/was predominantly perceived as a place where ‘non-violent controversies erupt’ (Keane 1996: 34). It is supposed to be a place where public opinion is developed and sustained.

Critically, public sphere theory is grounded in the principle of a communicative democracy and free expression. In essence, players must exercise and enjoy equality of rights, and this implies lateral equality of participants/discussants (Habermas 1962). In a public sphere, there should be no threats or potential use of threats as to limit self-expression by individuals or groups. Viewed through Habermasian lens, the media should be a space where everyone has the freedom to debate socio-economic and political issues that affect their lives (Habermas 1962). The public sphere must be defined by universal participation, autonomy of the media and critical rational discourse (Habermas 1962). The public sphere ethic, ‘[…] oriented towards inter-subjective understanding and consensus’ (Holub 1991: 8).

Though Habermas’ public sphere concept has been revisited and repurposed especially in a changing media communication environment across the globe, approaches utilizing an African perspective are scarce. Ndlela (2007) challenges African scholars to de-westernize western theories in order to develop theories applicable to African conditions. We therefore, make a bold attempt to engage Habermas utilizing traditional African communicative platforms in the pre-colonial Shona society of Zimbabwe.

Habermas (1962) locates the genesis and development of the public sphere in the emergence of capitalist society in Western Europe. According to Habermas (1962) the advent of capitalism led to the rise of a bourgeoisie class that was antagonistic to the feudal order. Enlightenment
brought a shift in the means of production and decline in religious beliefs and religious political
order. Critically, reason became the basis of human emancipation and the quest for knowledge
became one of the main preoccupations of society. This was evident in the literary works of
philosophers and also in the rise of a reading public who discussed topical issues of the day
(Habermas 1962).

These places soon became a platform where this newly emerging class shared information
about commerce, politics, and their new lifestyles. Later, newspapers became a central aspect
of this activity. The early newspapers were read in groups in coffee houses and salons in
Britain, Germany and France. Coffee houses, pubs and salons marked the genesis of the public
sphere while the advent of the print and electronic media (as we know it) meant further
augmentation of its scope and breadth (Habermas 1962, 1989). People in the coffee houses and
salons had allegiance to the ‘authority of better argument against hierarchy’ (Habermas 1992:
36). Fear, favour and class interests were seen as an affront to rationality, which is the sinew
of the public sphere (Habermas 1962).

It is critical to note that the productive and progressive debate in the public sphere is ‘distorted
if not mutilated by imbalances of access, wealth, and power’ (Price 1995: 26). Habermas (1989)
bemoans the re-feudalization or hijacking of the public sphere by corporate forces, advertisers,
public relations, spin doctors, among others. Habermas’ concept has been criticized for
example, by feminists (see Curran 1991; Fraser 1992) for failure to be inclusive. The concept
has been expanded in the context of development of ‘alternative public spheres’, ‘competing
public spheres’, digital and counter-hegemonic public spheres (Fraser 1992). Adequate
attention has been proffered on the subject. This discussion engages the Habermasian public
sphere from an African perspective utilizing the Dariro and Dare philosophy.
Unpacking concepts Dariro and Dare

The democratic and participatory dimensions of the indigenous Shona communication platforms are discussed utilizing Dariro, which also cascades into Dare. Mahoso (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) contends that the common symbol of African Relational Philosophy (*unhu*) is the Dariro, a ubiquitous African circle defined by ‘call and response’ i.e. *kushaura nokutsinhira*. Long before the invention of interactive digital technologies, Africans designed the Dariro as the best structure used by those in search of mutual understanding, reconciliation and solidarity (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Dariro and Dare are both physical spaces and metaphorical symbols. The Dariro in African life over many millennia exists at the family level, at the community level, at the education and entertainment levels, and at the state level. Dariro is associated with play, entertainment and informal family communication and instruction. However, Dare is the Dariro elevated to an arena of authority either as an educational authority or as adjudicating or law-giving authority. In pre-colonial Shona society, Dariro could also be read as a circular space where people displayed talent. Symbolically, Dariro is a theatre where performances take place. Dariro as an aesthetic structure puts the performer and the audience in one continuum. The performer is part audience and part performer (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The link between the two lies in the so-called ‘call and response’ mechanism- *kuparura or kushaura nekutsinhira kana nekugadzirisa zvisinga tsinhirike kuti zvizotsinhirika*. In that case Dariro is a political, educational, moral and aesthetic structure embodying the relationship between those chosen by the same Dariro/Dare to lead (*kuparura/kushaura*) on one hand, and those who have chosen them and who confirm their leadership through response (*kutsinhira or kugadzirisa*) on the other (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). This concept is also akin to the Gramscian concept of rule by consent (see Gramsci 1971). Joining the Dariro is a silent expression of willingness to sing or dance; or willingness
to learn to sing and dance along; or willingness to speak the language spoken in the *Dariro* and willingness to abide by the consensus, which may emerge from the process of the *Dariro* (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

Different societal activities such *nhimbe* (cooperatives) espoused the concept of *Dariro*. These *nhimbes* were common during times of sowing, weeding and harvesting. While the idea was to help each other, these activities provided opportunities to discuss topical issues and problems albeit in a jocular manner. For example, *Jakwara/nhimbe yekupura* (cooperative for harvesting maize, sorghum or rapoko) was very popular in Shona societies. This occasion was carnivalesque (see Bakhtin 1984) as participants freely engaged in any kind of talk, mocking those allegedly involved in unacceptable activities such as witchcraft, stealing, gossiping, among others. No one would take offence or grudge. *Nhimbe* in general and *Jakwara* in particular, created a humorous communicative space where even the ‘feared’ were taken to task. However, the thrust of *nhimbe* was on working together for development. Such platforms also strengthened social and cultural relations in society. Communication regulated societies and maintained checks on transgressors and deviators. As mentioned earlier, the concept *Dariro* was fluid and multiple. The concept was replicated in different activities, such as dances during or after harvest times. Dances such as *Mbende, Jerusarema, Kongonya*, among others, were performed in a *Dariro* to entertain people during different occasions. However, these dances communicated something within a cultural context. Even at funerals, songs, dance and jokes and the obscene were and in some still are the order of the day. It was not only an African way of fostering development and harmony but was also a way of dealing with grief.

As highlighted earlier, depending on the degree of formality and authority accorded to it at the particular level, the *Dariro* becomes the *Dare* (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The word *Dare*, also known as *Chivara* (Gombe 1998), incorporates two dimensions. First, it refers ‘to a traditional sitting and eating place for men in pre-colonial Shona societies’ (Gombe 1998: 41).
Second, *Dare*, also refers to a forum, a gathering, or a court (from family level, usually presided by madzitete-aunties, village heads and by Chiefs/Kings). This forum usually discusses a problem affecting family or community (Gombe 1998). Our discussion in this article focuses on both types of *Dare* because they are intricately intertwined and are vital cogs in traditional African communication systems.

Before colonialism in the Shona society, every clan had its own *Dare* or *Chivara* – for men only. This place was usually strategically located a distance away from homes, closer to big trees or anthills (Gombe 1998). This would help men to protect their families and animals from any intruders or wild animals. However, it is also plausible to assert that *Dare* (for men only) was located a distance away from the home to ensure that women or children would not eavesdrop conversations taking place at this platform. It was mandatory for all men and boys graduating into adulthood to converge at this *Dare* in the evening and morning before embarking on their day-to-day chores. Men who absconded this place spending time in the kitchen with women were despised. Age was the organizing principle when it came to the sitting and eating arrangements at this space. Every household would provide food to be shared equally amongst men at *Dare*. This meant that no one would starve as food was always shared. Moreover, at *Dare* men would not only eat Sadza (Zimbabwe’s staple food), but other perceived ‘manly’ dishes such as *mazondo* (ox knuckles) and herbs (assumed to boost their virility and libido) and ‘harden’ their hearts to make them brave (Gombe 1998). Men would at times spend their leisure time relaxing at this space. This is where male visitors were entertained (Gombe 1998). More often, men would engage in rational discussions on various topics ranging from politics, economics and social life. *Dare* was also a space for recreation. It was common for men to engage in traditional sporting activities at this space. According to Gombe (1998), such sporting activities helped in developing their expertise in different ways.
The Dariro concept was also replicated in Dare remusha (family court) and Dare ramambo (Chief/King’s court). The chief’s Dare consisted of representatives from diverse families, who at times presided over Dare remusha. This was the biggest dispute resolution court in Shona societies. In fact, Dare was a dispute resolution forum, a policy-making forum, a consensus making and team bonding forum, a war council, among others. While minor disputes between two or more families could be resolved at Dare remusha, bigger disputes or crimes such as murder were brought to the attention of the Chief’s court. This Chief’s court had legitimacy in the court of public opinion since different members of society were represented. In a sense there was representative democracy.

Chiefs did not make solo decisions in dispute resolutions, but were assisted by a council of advisors consisting of machinda (members of the royal family) and makurukota (non-members of the royal family). Makurukota were usually respected leaders at Dare in their own families (Gombe 1998). Moreover, at any given moment, the accuser, the accused and witnesses were allowed to offer accounts of an issue. On incidents where some requested compensation, the Chief’s court would assess the matter to ensure transparency.

However, with the coming of colonialism, Dare raMambo’s power became limited. Now it secured legitimacy and jurisdiction from the Native Commissioners and District Administrators under customary law. In a bifurcated colonial state, citizens (whites) and subjects (blacks) were governed separately (Mamdani 1996). The natives (subjects) were governed through ‘decentralized despotism’ permeated by tradition and customary order, overseen by a rural chiefly authority as the lowest ranking and salaried colonial official. Thus the traditional or ‘original’ concept of Dare raMambo in pre-colonial Shona society was diluted.

**Beyond Habermas: Democratic and participatory dimensions of Dariro and Dare**
We show that there are some areas of commonality between Habermas’ public sphere theory and the Dariro and Dare concepts. However, our main intention here is to show rich elements in the Dariro and Dare philosophies, which are elusive in the Habermasian public sphere. However, to some extent we also show the ‘closed’ nature or limits of the two Shona communication platforms. For a start, Dariro and Dare encouraged exchange communication through the process of kushaura and kutsinhira (call and response). Without kutsinhira (response), the act is reduced to kupaumba (shouting) in a Dariro (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Interview, Harare, 7 November 2018). In that case there is no dialogue and exchange of meanings, which is the thrust of communication. In this set up, the performer is part of the audiences and members can always exchange roles. Both verbal and non-verbal cues signified power relations in these African traditional platforms of communication. African oral culture was also rich in the use of idioms and proverbs, sometimes even to broach serious issues or even to challenge authority communicatively.

The main strength of these African public spaces goes beyond communicative interactions. While Habermas’ public sphere emerged in coffee shops, pubs and salons and later the press (Habermas 1962), Dariro and Dare’s relational philosophy goes beyond. Dariro has no beginning and no end structure (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). While the idea of Habermas’ public sphere is traced in the development of the western capitalist society, African public spaces – Dariro and Dare have always been there. The Dariro philosophy is reflected in the aesthetic structure of almost all African architectural structures including Great Zimbabwe. Moreover, most African shelters especially huts were circular resembling the Dariro. Village settlements also largely followed a circular pattern where people lived as families constituting nzanga yemusha. This circular set up was also reminiscent of the Dariro and Dare itself, where people would sit in a circle facing each other. That set up is significant. African memory is modelled along the ubiquitous Dariro (circle) and it radiates (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).
Circular settlements and *Dariro* also shows how Africans valued cyclic as opposed to linear communication.

In fact, *Dariro* is not about the physical communication and interaction platform only. Rather, it stands for the universe of human values, the institutional nature of relations and relationships, which Africans experience only partially through the participation of those individuals who happen to be in the particular *Dariro* at present. Mahoso (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) gives an example of a scenario where one’s mother dies and *umai* (the value of mother) does not go into the grave. For African children, the circle meant that there were always several mothers, several fathers per child in the circle. In essence, when one kinsman or kinswoman dies or leaves, the circle representing *ukama* (kinship) remains and continues to nurture the continuing and continuous values of kinship, even reproducing new relations and relatives. Relationships were larger than individuals. African circles were therefore, about optimal relationships and interrelationships, love and solidarity as opposed to Habermas’ bourgeoisie public spheres where private individuals masquerading as a public met to discuss politics, commerce and lifestyles.

*Dariro* allows participants to look at every part of the world. In a sense, the idea of globalization was always espoused in the *Dariro* philosophy. While some are looking at the East those in the opposite directions are looking West. If someone is looking at the North, the other is looking at the South. In a *Dariro* no part of the globe is ignored. Africans therefore, did not discover globalization through colonization (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Pre-colonial societies were already thinking global. This sitting arrangement defines and leaves common space inside the circle, which teaches, symbolizes and demonstrates the living reality of those values, which belong to all of us together, but not to one, alone (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Importantly, the organization of the *Dariro* incorporated defensive mechanisms. Participants in the African *Dariro* would not be caught unaware by enemies. The principle was watch my back and I watch
yours. The element of security precludes the Habermasian public sphere, plausibly due to the European context in which Habermas was writing.

Compared to the Habermasian bourgeoisie public sphere, the African Dario is elastic. When there are more participants, it widens and when participants are fewer, the Dario is reduced and ranks are closed (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Inclusivity is singled out as one of the missing dimension in Habermas’ ideal bourgeoisie public sphere concept. Bourgeois public spheres were elitist public spheres based on liberal thinking (Fraser 1992). These platforms were not an embodiment of universal rationality (wisdom), but rather spheres that excluded other forms of thinking and political concerns: proletariat, peasants and women (Fraser 1992). In addition, even when newspapers became the central aspect of the public sphere, productive and progressive is ‘distorted if not mutilated by imbalances of access, wealth, and power’ (Price 1995: 26), rendering the attainment of an ideal public sphere a Sisyphean task. The same scenario is also applicable to digital social media platforms, which remain echo chambers of the elite voice. However, the African Dario was more inclusive and accommodated almost everyone regardless of levels of income, ethnicity and gender. Outsiders are allowed to join Dario and perhaps become entitled to share in the common values at the centre. Dario and Dare encouraged universal participation and discussions were rational as advocated for by Habermas’ public sphere concept.

While bourgeoisie public spheres excluded children, the African Dario had children at heart hence making it more humane and democratic. While children could easily mix with adults at different versions of Dario and Dare, there were also specific circles for them to perform arts and learn games. In their Dario, children played different games and activities, depending with the time of the year. Hodza (1984) argues that some of the popular activities among
children under full moon included dramas, narrating folk tales, Zvitsvambe, Zai rakaora (rotten egg) and Sarura wako (make your choice). For example, in Sarura wako, boys and girls would stand in a circle while one goes at the centre to call (kuparura/kushaura) Sarura wako (make your choice); while members of the circle would respond – kutsinhira. The boy would choose a girl of his choice. The opposite would also happen with a girl. Every participant would get an opportunity to go at the stage (Dariro) to make his or her choice. There was voluntary democratic participation. These platforms were also rich in the sense that no singular gender, no single age group and no single person monopolized the teaching and upbringing of children. That universal spread of instruction is the essence of Dariro and Dare (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In this case, Africans appreciated the relational philosophy of complementing each other in the upbringing of children in the broader societal Dariro. Importantly, the kind of education imparted to boys and girls respectively was not linear or the banking type of education but dialogic (cf. Freire 1970).

Dariro and Dare were also richer than the Habermasian public sphere in the sense that it was not only an entertaining but pedagogical and andragogical space. At community or neighbourhood levels the guiding mantra was that ‘the harm inflicted on your neighbour’s child in that Dariro or Dare potentially can be inflicted on your own child sitting in the same circle’. In addition, harm inflicted on your neighbour’s mother sitting in that Dariro of mothers could also befall your mother, aunt, or sister occupying the same space in that circle (Mahoso 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Beyond participatory communication, the circle therefore, taught solidarity as daily common sense and practice. Such elements precludes the Habermasian public sphere. Moreover, Dare revarume was not only an eating but educative space. Senior members (especially the advanced in age), had the responsibility to educate young boys and the recently married about marriage life. Both cognitive and psychomotor skills were also nurtured at such platforms. At a broader level, Dare had the responsibility to shape the lives of Shona people,
especially men cultivating accepted customs and societal values which helped people to coexist with minimal discord or friction. Mahoso (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) avers that Dario and Dare served as refineries where ideas and discourses were shaped. Importantly, the culture of eating together at a Dario or Dare cultivated the spirit of sharing, oneness and communal solidarity. Dare encouraged togetherness, sharing, understanding among other things. Dario and Dare defused crises in society at any given moment.

African public spheres were public arenas preoccupied with public and not private concerns. These were also information and opinion sharing platforms, where narcissism had no place. Individuality – one’s uniqueness as a personality is valued in the African Dario and forms the basis of contribution and cooperation. The assumption is that when one contributes s/he gives a varied view, making Dario a mating place of ideas envisaged in Habermas’ public sphere. The driving and guiding ethic of the Habermasian public sphere is inter-subjective understanding and consensus (Habermas 1962; Holub 1991). African Dario and Dare also embraces the same philosophy. Mahoso (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) cites an example of the Shona proverb expressing this all-round optimism and faith in the Dario, which says: Iri mudare iri murwaenga; ichaibva. According to Mahoso (2018a, 2018b, 2018c), the process of turning the popcorn or peanuts repeatedly in the roasting pan is a metaphor for consensus seeking through the Dare or Dario. Ordinary members of the gallery engaged in free discussions on matters. Protagonists were given an opportunity to be heard, to be questioned and to question. This type of communication at the Dare confounded even the romanticized bourgeois Habermasian public sphere. This is because even a homeless person would freely participate in a discussion. Thus pre-colonial Dare romusha (forum for family discussions) and Dare raMambo were marked by people participation at every level. In both Dare and Dario, there were no confined senders (information source). Neither were there permanent receivers of information. Communication was circular, engaging all participants. We demonstrate that communication
systems in the pre-colonial Shona society recognized that communication is a fundamental human right. The freedom to speak at any level was acknowledged as an essential component of human dignity and cultural identity. This is because communication strengthens human dignity, and validates human equality.

*Dariro* and *Dare* were defined by volunteering, agency, equity, justice. Men, women and children freely participated and had rights to be heard. Importantly, platforms such as *Jakwara* (cooperatives) were undoubtedly the best democratic and open spaces in the Shona society. Such activities were salient sites for the unfolding play of power. In African societies, speaking truth to power the ‘opposite way’ was always considered as the right way to go about issues. For instance, one didn’t openly challenge his or her seniors but it was done diplomatically through jokes, proverbs/sayings (*tsumo nemadimikira*, etc.). The closest one came to telling someone the truth in a direct way, which was again indirect, was *kurova bembera*. Such practices were critical in regulating social and cultural relationships as well as people’s behaviours. Due to such freedoms, participatory communication helped in defusing different types and levels of crises at any given moment.

Habermas (1962) contends that discussions in the public sphere were marked by rationality and equal participation. However, the theory is silent on how rationality and critical debates were maintained. In the African *Dariro* of *Dare* ramambo, there was always a mechanism of ensuring debate remained rational. For instance, perceived threats to health and critical debates were eliminated by asking those making aberrant or off topic contributions to leave. The common practice was that such offenders were asked to go *kundovhiya mbudzi* – skin a goat which normally served as relish for the meal after court deliberations. Though critics might find fault in this exclusionary culture, in a way it ensured debate remain focused.
Democratic limits of Dariro and Dare

Just like the Habermasian public sphere, Dariro and Dare are not immune to criticism. The major weakness of African Dariro in the form of Dare revarume is that it segregated and excluded women from participating in other societal activities. Women were ‘othered’ and ‘infantilized’. Dare revarume was a romanticization of patriarchal and misogynistic male cultures. The exclusion of women can be equated to the Habermasian public sphere which in its initial formulation excluded women. There were also moments especially in Dare romusha (family forum discussions) when men assumed roles of information sources/senders, while women were relegated to receivers of information. Communication was at times linear in these spaces. Of course, there were moments when madzitete (aunties) presided over cases in families but within limits of patriarchy. Even in the assumed participatory Dariro men were to a larger extent (powerful) encoders, while women were the subservient (decoders/receivers). Moreover, while women had their own public sphere, which excluded men – the kitchen – which in most cases was always circular; a Dariro, where they discussed their own matters of importance, key decisions came from Dare revarume.

Language and culture at times served as ‘noise’ in Dare romusha and Dare ramambo-limiting participation of others. For example, some of the participants did not easily comprehend idioms and proverbs utilized in these platforms. For example, an over-cited case in Shona narratives was when a young man at the Chief’s Dare would fail to answer the question Ndiwe here wakatyora musikana uyu gumbo. In literal translation the question is ‘Did you break this girl’s leg?’. However, connotatively the question would be asking the young man whether he is responsible for impregnating the young woman who would have reported the case. Semantics symbolically served as noise.
Whither African Dario and Dare?

Energies of capitalism which broadened the scope and breadth of the public sphere by facilitating the development of electronic and print media (Habermas 1962) and later on contributed to the re-feudalization of the space (Habermas 1989) also adversely affected the African Dario and Dare. The establishment of a colonial state in 1890, under the leadership of Cecil John Rhodes’ British South Africa Company (BSAC), immensely contributed to the demise of both Dare and Dario communicative spaces in the Shona society of Zimbabwe. For example, colonial authorities rejected the traditionally preferred circular settlements in Shona societies, which allowed interactions in Dario and Dare; and prescribed linear settlements (Gombe 1998). Energies of modernity also killed Dare since they brought industrialization in Africa. Of course, Dare rashe (chief’s court forum) and Dare remhuri (family forum) have survived globalization pressures in rural settings, albeit some ‘original’ aspects have been lost, but Dare revarume whithered. Most men were displaced from their traditional organic communities, to work for wages in factories and industries in urban areas. Women and children were in most cases left alone, and this had serious repercussions on Dare revarume. Capitalism and modernity also promoted individualism and competition as opposed to sharing and oneness amongst Africans, which were key defining principles of Dario and Dare. Mahoso (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) contends that in the context of the post-2000 recurring Zimbabwean crisis, urban centres are marked by Chihwindi (touting) and mitsara (queuing) cultures, underpinned by zvangu zvaita (individualism) as opposed to sharing and oneness. Dario represented synthesis, coordination, the aspiration for convergence and harmonization, which are however currently exclusive.
Perhaps, the concept is replicated somewhere else in industrialized capitalist societies. Gombe (1998) asserts that pubs today symbolize traditional *Dare* in the pre-colonial Shona society. This is however, problematic since in African societies there was always the beer drinking and sharing cultures. In this set up, people sat in a circle sharing opaque beer and discussing matters of the day and sometimes singing and dancing. Modern day pubs actually lack defining principles of the traditional *Dare* and *Dariro*. For instance, at *Dare*, communication was defined by rationality, equal participation, etc. Moreover, there was a universal spirit of sharing which at times is lacking in pubs. In fact, people despise those with weak financial pockets. Finally, women now freely roam in pubs unlike the gendered traditional *Dare*.

Despite the demise of *Dariro* and *Dare* in the era of modernity, we argue that the two spaces can best be utilized to criticize western models of communication and democracy, and in this case Habermas’ public sphere. These spaces allowed democratic participation of citizens. *Dare* and *Dariro* were open and democratic in a certain sense. The two platforms replicated cyclical round table discussions. Almost everyone in the clan was represented at *Dare remhuri* (family). Even boys and girls participated in these platforms.

During early days of colonization and invention of radio in the African society, people gathered in circles and listened to the medium. Similarly, such circles were replicated as people listened to a novel or bible being read. Discussions then ensued as people shared meanings. However, in modern times Africans especially in Zimbabwe’s urban centres have dismantled the concept of the *Dariro*. In the era of new Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) most people spend time on their devices such as smartphones. Of course messages are shared but not in the manner of a *Dariro*. Digital participation divides hinders attainment of this *Dariro*. However, rural based Africans still get the opportunity. For example, when the first author visits his rural
home (Gokwe), he usually sits in a circle with parents, siblings and kith and kin and catch up on happenings in the villages and in the urban areas and the country at large.

**Conclusion**

This article has broadened the understanding of communication by using indigenous concepts which reward attention but have not been used to interrogate communication. As argued by Ziegler and Asante (1992), no understandings of the contemporary philosophies of mass communication in Africa can be held without a full appreciation of the role of traditional aspects of communication. Democratic dimensions of these platforms are discussed in relation to Habermas’ public sphere theory. Our intention is not to undermine the Habermasian public sphere nor dismiss it; it has its definite place in modern African nations that are prone to autocracy as Rønning (1997) argues. Rather, utilizing a case from the global south, we complement discussions on communication and democracy by highlighting some of the critical components and philosophies espoused in traditional African communication systems. The study shows that African societies indeed, premodern African oral communication, encouraged exchange and not linear communication. Both verbal and non-verbal cues signified power relations. *Dare* and *Dariro* (as African communication systems/models), were guided by principles of fairness, equity and justice. However, we also show limits of these platforms such as exclusion of women in *Dare revarume*. Such limits are also evident in the Habermasian public sphere.

**Acknowledgements**

We are indebted to Dr Tafataona Mahoso’s ideas and philosophy in exploration of the *Dariro* and *Dare* in his weekly column in *The Patriot* newspaper-Homecoming. Mahoso also generously granted us exclusive interviews on the subject.
References


____ (2018c), ““Liberation” as escalation of intimate disclosures’, The Patriot, 5 October, pp. 6.


**Contributor details**

Lyton Ncube is Postdoctoral Research fellow, Department of Communication Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Keyan G. Tomaselli is distinguished professor, Department of Communication, University of Johannesburg.

Contact:

Department of Communication, University of Johannesburg, Kingsway Campus, Auckland Park 2006, Johannesburg, South Africa

E-mail: lytonncube@gmail.com; lytonn@uj.ac.za (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8754-3080)

E-mail: Keyant@uj.ac.za

https://orcid.org/ 0000-0002-2995-0726
Shona is an umbrella term for inhabitants of Zimbabwe since pre-colonial times, including the Karanga, Manyika, Zezuru, N’dau (Gombe 1998; Sithole 1999; Muzondidya and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007). Geographically, Shona speakers are largely concentrated in Northern provinces – Mashonaland, Masvingo, Manicaland and the Midlands provinces in contemporary times.