

Short reflections on the history of African communication

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Recibido: 2 de diciembre de 2014

Aceptado: 28 de abril de 2015

Abstract

This article aims to propose a chronological subdivision in the history of African communication. African communication today is one of the most important axes for implementing development strategies, sustaining education, health, and schooling programmes, and so on. However, many of these programmes fail due to a lack of or ineffective communication between international organisations, local elite and lay people. The reasons for this situation must be found in Africa's history of communication, which has undergone radical transformations in its different phases. Using the functionalist analysis drawn up by Jakobson, this article proposes a new chronological subdivision of Africa's history of communication, reflecting on the current contradictions in contemporary communication in Africa.

Key words: African History; Communication; Colonialism; Independence; Functionalism, Stages.

Breves reflexiones sobre la historia de la comunicación africana

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo proponer una subdivisión cronológica en la historia de la comunicación africana. Hoy en día la comunicación africana es uno de los ejes más importantes para la implementación de estrategias de desarrollo, para sostener la educación, la salud y los programas de escolarización y así sucesivamente. Sin embargo, muchos de estos programas fracasan debido a la falta o a la ineficaz comunicación entre las organizaciones internacionales, la élite local y los laicos. Las razones de esta situación se deben encontrar en la historia de la comunicación africana, que ha sufrido transformaciones radicales en sus diferentes fases. Utilizando el análisis funcionalista elaborado por Jakobson, en este artículo se propone una nueva subdivisión cronológica de la historia de la comunicación africana, reflexionando sobre las contradicciones actuales en la comunicación contemporánea en África.

Palabras clave: Historia de África; Comunicación; Colonialismo; Independencia; Funcionalismo; Etapas.

Referencia normalizada

Bussotti, L. (2015). Short reflections on the history of African communication. *Historia y Comunicación Social*. Vol 20, número 1, páginas 205-222.

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1. Introduction

Criticisms of the dominant Western paradigm have generally been made from an epistemological perspective, without taking a basic element of its success into account: communication. On the contrary, it is a prominent element in the process of the general hegemony of Western civilisation, whose main function has been persuasion (Mattelart, 1999). Only a few research projects have focused on the ways in which Western principles have been transmitted and inculcated all around the world (Moemeta, 1989; Melkote and Steeves, 2001; Quebral, 2002).

In particular, Africa suffered an intense, prolonged and violent process of subjugation to external forces. Firstly, between the 7th and 19th centuries, the Arabs captured between 10 and 18 million Africans, making them slaves (Miller, 2002). Later (and sometimes simultaneously), Western powers colonised many African territories, firstly indirectly, in order to capture slaves who had to work on the cotton farms in the Americas, and then directly (from the Berlin Conference until the 1970s), occupying almost all African regions. Little attention has been paid to communication, its transformation and its evolution, when analysing this complex process. For this reason, this article intends to stress the importance and different stages of communication in Africa, proposing a possible chronological subdivision of African forms of communication, without examining questions of a philosophical nature (Thion'g, 1986, 1997; Asante, 1998, 2003, 2008).

The key hypothesis of this article is that colonialism, especially in its last modern phase, dramatically changed the paradigm and practices of communication in African communities. According to Jakobson (Jakobson, 1960), communication can be classified into six basic functions. One of the least important, from his perspective, is the phatic function, since it is not focused on the message, on the sender or on the receiver, but rather on the situation. It is possible to say that in Africa or, in general, in non-European countries, this function is traditionally the most relevant. However, colonisation imposed a new form of communication, reducing the phatic function and, consequently, destroying the traditional and highly established manner of communicating used by the indigenous people. Today, most African elites continue to use the "colonised" language. This could be one of the main reasons for explaining the current permanent gap between lay people and the ruling African classes, also in the field of communication.

This article is divided into three sections. The first one presents a short framework of the main concepts used here, in relation to the field of communication and its application to the African context. The second one seeks to draw an outline of the evolution of African communication over history. Section three reflects on the current situation of African communication models. Finally, some conclusive remarks will be presented at the end of the article.

2. Conceptualisation

In this section, the aim is to clarify the concept and functions of communication, starting with the functionalist theory proposed by Jakobson and the basic study by Malinowski in relation to this issue.

Etymologically, communication has a clear meaning: it finds its roots in the Latin verb “communicare” (“to share”), deriving from the word “communis” (“public, common”). So, in its essence, the act of communicating assumes that people have common values and beliefs, and are able to constitute a community (Rosengren, 2000).

The functionalist approach proposed by Jakobson drew inspiration from the mechanistic model, according to which communication is the transfer of information from a source to a receiver, using symbols (Shannon, Weaver, 1949). Jakobson’s analysis of communication is based on the stimulus-response theory. He identifies six main functions of communication, which are:

- Denotative or cognitive, focused on the context;
- Emotive, sender-oriented;
- Conative or persuasive, receiver-oriented, with a frequent use of imperative sentences;
- Phatic, channel-oriented, centred not on messages (which often do not have important meanings), but on establishing or maintaining a sense of community among the participants in the process of communication;
- Metalinguistic, code-oriented (Tarski, 1930), such as a text on grammar and syntax structures;
- Poetic or aesthetic, message-oriented.

Studies in communication and linguistics which have drawn inspiration from Jakobson have emphasised that the phatic function is not as important as all the others. “Phatic function – as stated by prominent researchers (Coupland, Coupland, Robinson, 1992: 207) – remains an often appealed to but underanalyzed term in an implicit taxonomy of discourse ‘type’”.

The reason why linguistics has not considered this particular function as pivotal for the comprehension of communication is due to the fact that it is meaningless. In the Western way of life, this feature can be considered a waste of time. According to this approach, the focus of the communication process has to be meaningful and, if possible, receiver-oriented. It means that in contemporary Western society, the conative function takes on special importance in fields like political struggles, military campaigns, commercial marketing and so on. In this case, it is easy to note a great continuity between the current conative function and the idea of persuasion used by Greek philosophers, first of all the pre-Socratic Parmenides and Heraclitus. As two Italian scholars point out, in Parmenides’ and Heraclitus’ opinions, the path to the truth cannot be separated from persuasion. Once reached, truth has to be spread

to lay people. They have to learn by hearing the most enlightened people, philosophers (Nicolaci, 1994; Impara, 1997). The other important philosophical school that emphasised persuasion was the Sophistic school. In this case, the aim is not the search for truth, but rather the need to convince people, in court and in the political arena, that one thesis should be preferred over others. Here, persuasion assumes a public state. In both cases, the conative function represents the main approach of communication (Fahnestock, 2011).

Western tradition of communication has been embedded, since the first times of Greek philosophy, in a strategy directed towards convincing others. So, when Jakobson presents the conative function as one of the pivotal goals of the speaker, he testifies to a continuous line starting from this ancient tradition.

For this reason, the phatic function is only scarcely considered, but considered negatively, “particularly when talk is analysed to be referentially deficient and communicatively insignificant” (Idem: 209). This is the position, for instance, of Abercrombie (Abercrombie, 1956).

The phatic function is not an “invention” by Jakobson. He applied this concept to linguistic analysis, but the first person to probably coin this term was the anthropologist Malinowski. He spoke, in a classic essay written in 1923, of “phatic communion” as a “language used in free, aimless, social intercourse” (Malinowski, 1972: 142), whose main function was the “mere change of words” (Idem: 150). In short, this formulation intended to outline one of the key linguistic factors of “primitive” societies (or rather, communities), in which it is more important to establish relational ties than to persuade the other, to impose a certain point of view, in order to emerge as the leader of a group.

Only in relatively recent times has the phatic side of communication been recovered. Once more, it occurred not from a linguistic point of view, but thanks to anthropological and micro-sociological aspects. Goffman, with his sociology of interaction, considered conversation to be the key factor for communicating with others (Goffman, 1967, 1969). Ethnomethodology has continued to use this approach, strengthening the importance of conversation analysis in order to understand the procedures (methodologies) with which people produce meanings for their actions in relation to the actions of others (Garfinkel, 1967). Today, conversation analysis has a pivotal role in a significant proportion of qualitative social sciences studies, proposing a very different approach in comparison with the positivistic or functionalist ones (Silvermann, 2004).

The basic theoretical hypothesis presented here is as follows: traditional African forms of communication were embedded in phatic function. When the Europeans colonised Africa, the phatic function underwent a dramatic transformation: it disappeared in favour of the conative function. This radical passage completely altered social relations in Africa, so that today it is very difficult to return to phatic communion between lay people, since the Western model of communication has gained a strong and lasting presence.

The other basic concept adopted here is a chronological subdivision of African communication, according to a functionalist analysis, with its influences on African society and the transformations it produced. The landmark proposed here is colonialism. The great difficulty is embedding this issue within African history in general. It means that:

First of all, “African communication scholars have not yet developed authentic theories of African communication” in part because of “the social and political climates that are primarily anti-intellectual” (Okigbo, 1987: 19), to some extent due to the colonial experience that left Africa in a prolonged, subordinated condition.

Secondly, until now, no consensus has been reached as regards the various phases of African history. The most common approach to read the development of African history continues to be a “Eurocentric” one. It means that African history is seen in accordance with the categories of universal history, which correspond to Western chronological subdivisions. According to this perspective, slave trades, colonialism, struggles against colonialism and so on become the milestones of African history (The Cambridge History of Africa, 1986).

After obtaining independence, that is, since the 1960s, some African studies scholars have been trying to invert this trend. The most significant attempt was made by UNESCO and its *General History of Africa* (UNESCO, 1989-1999). A similar position had been defended by Ki-Zerbo, who stressed that colonialism did not represent the sole experience to define African history (Ki-Zerbo, 1972). Different historiographical traditions have expressed their interpretations of African history. The Marxist strand, for example, stressed the idea of anchoring African history to the transformation of the local pattern of production, emphasising the impact of imperialism carried out by European powers (Sik, 1964; Amin, 1970). The World-Systems Theory also stressed global factors in which Africa should be included, as a peripheral part of the whole system (Wallerstein, 1986). Other interpretations have tended to focus on a chronological subdivision centred on the inner transformation of African societies (Davidson, 1965; Hrbek, 1971; Benton, 2002). But the conclusion of these different approaches seems to be quite similar: the chronological subdivision of an African history continues to be an unsolved problem (Filesi, 1978). This is true even with the idea that it is “*illégitime de démarquer l’histoire de l’Afrique de ses rapports avec l’Occident, en sus spécifiquement coloniaux*” (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2004), according to a legacy inherited from the “*bibliothèque coloniale*” (Mudime, 1988).

Nevertheless, especially for modern and contemporary history, all these scholars agree that the slave trade firstly and colonialism or European invasion or European imperialism (depending on the approach adopted) immediately afterwards represent an indispensable milestone that framed African society, from West to East and from North to South (with the partial exception of Maghreb region).

The key hypothesis defended here is that traditional forms of communication in Africa have been dramatically replaced by different, external forms because of the strong influence of the slave trade and colonialism. As the economic structures of

African societies underwent a deep alteration due to the above-mentioned factors, the same occurred with the forms of communication. For this reason, the chronological subdivision presented here emphasises these external factors in African history, trying to understand how local languages responded to these violent solicitations.

3. The evolution of African Communication

In this section, a chronological subdivision based on the various phases of African communication will be proposed. This subdivision is based on the following stages:

3.1. The traditional system of communication: the primacy of phatic function

Today many studies point out that African communication has its own particular features, different from Western ones. A “traditional African communication” can be considered, according to Des Wilson, “as a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated by western culture or any other external influence as is the case in many parts of the world” (Wilson, 1987: 89). It means that, firstly, there are many dimensions that are typical of traditional communication (such as symbols, signs, colours, music and so on); secondly, there are different cultures that can find a space in traditional communication, avoiding the attempt to homogenise, typical of the Western mass media; finally, that “the traditional system is not competitive” (Idem: 100), since it belongs to the community. Communication is here a “common” asset that aims to include and not marginalise groups of individuals within society.

For instance, a strategic function of traditional communication in Africa is the regulation of justice and deviance, outside the formal, Western schemes: “In pre-colonial Uganda each society had set conventions, customs and traditions which regulated social behaviour, harmony and stability. These unwritten laws provided a set of acceptable behaviours and controlled deviants in society” (Sewanyane, 2004: 49-50). It was the same for Swahili people (Fabian, 1986) and most African populations: this led some scholars to conclude that the general way of communicating in traditional Africa suffered from a very significant breakdown among the natives because of the experience of colonialism (Afisi, 2009). Its consequence was the loss of the bases of traditional forms of communication, such as songs, storytelling, drumming, principally proverbs, which had “a deterrent effect of wrong-doing” (Sewanyane, 2004: 50).

The Arab influences and the first contact with Europeans provoked significant changes, altering the large prevalence of the traditional, phatic model of communication. But the great transformation occurred when slave trades and especially modern colonialism became the main factors in African societies. Here, the phatic function lost its primacy, in favour of the conative function, which was necessary to impose a form of communication on native people in accordance with the objectives of colonial regimes.

3.2. The crisis of the traditional system of communication: establishment of the conative function.

After the Berlin Conference (1885), colonialism penetrated into African societies, imposing a new kind of communication and a new mentality. A conative, directive approach was then necessary in order to be sure that indigenous people obeyed the orders of the various colonial governments. This transformation meant, as a direct consequence, that communication was used in different manners, among which it is possible to distinguish the following three as being the most significant:

1. As a means for political and social control;
2. As a means for creating ethno-cultural unity among indigenous people;
3. As a means for looking down on indigenous people, provoking a fall in their self-esteem and proposing Western values as the main points of reference.

All these functions are purely conative, strictly linked to colonial policies and their plan to subjugate local people. A short examination of the three topics mentioned above will better clarify this characteristic.

1. As Fabian states (Fabian, 1986), one of the basic preconditions for establishing regimes of a colonial type in Africa was the possibility of communicating with the colonised. As a result, control over communication became a strategic axis of all colonial policies. As a first measure, the colonial powers imposed the use of their respective languages. The British Empire, based on “indirect rule”, tried to leave room for vernacular languages too, using them as “a bulwark against modern nationalism”, even if knowledge of the English language was necessary in order to develop institutional communications between colonised and coloniser (Pupavac, 2012). Protestant missionaries made a very important contribution in this task. According to their tradition, their aim was to transmit the biblical message in local languages, so they translated the sacred texts into many of these languages. The religious message was better understood by local people; with it, other messages penetrated too, essentially of a cultural kind. Western values, history and traditions were enhanced: native languages functioned as the main means of internalising (always in an indirect manner) a sense of inferiority among indigenous people. At primary school, they learned in their own tongues, and only later did they switch to English, especially after the conclusion of the work of the Phelps-Stokes Commission which, at the beginning of the 1920s, obliged British colonies to adopt native languages in the first years of school (Albaugh, n.d.). Local languages were transformed into a way of subjugating indigenous people through the action of a local elite. Native tongues were preserved but they lost their particular property of a language of freedom and socialisation, and instead began to be considered as a simple means to availing the will of the British. On the other side, the French model of assimilation – used by the Belgians and Portuguese too – was much more violent than the British one. The colonised had to be assimilated, and

Catholic missionaries gave a decisive boost to reaching this goal. For them, it was not necessary for the indigenous people to be able to read the Bible, so it was not important to translate this text into their own languages. At school, French had to be the only language used from the first day of class (Albaugh, n.d.). In this case, native languages were simply ignored. Although with relevant differences, language carried out a role of social and political control over African people in the British Empire and in the French Empire. Language, especially political and religious language, seemed to paint a picture of exploitation, disdain and devaluation of local culture. Using an expression borrowed from Foucault, Western colonisers have been able to re-organise discourse and the colonised people's way of communicating. This discourse became hierarchical, closed and impenetrable; that is, a "forbidden territory", accessible only to "expert people" (Foucault, 1969). The "elitisation" of language will be one of the most difficult issues the new Africa will have to face.

2. Political and social control is better exerted if the colonisers have to deal with uniformed masses. Rules, customs, values, discipline are better imposed on homogeneous groups than heterogeneous ones. But Africa is a very heterogeneous territory. It was necessary, therefore, to draw up criteria able to standardise the various linguistic and cultural differences. European languages served this purpose; however, other ways were encountered to reach this goal. Particularly in francophone and lusophone Africa, several attempts were made. In general, the problem was two-fold: on the one hand, colonisers had to avoid the affirmation of a state-nation ideal. For example, in Rwanda the Belgian colonisers had to literally invent ethnic identities to destroy a sense of national community the local people had. So in 1930 a census established that a person was Tutsi if he had more than 10 oxen, and Hutu if he had less. This artificial separation was useful for controlling indigenous people using a discourse of differentiation based on an inexistent tradition (Fabietti, 1998). On the other hand, the same Belgian colonisers introduced (or greatly helped in the process) the Shaba Swahili to subjugate the populations of Katanga (Belgian Congo). As a result, Swahili penetrated into the Congo (whose main local languages are Kituba and Lingala) in a climate of competition with the other local languages, but not in a "pure" form. It means that Congolese Swahili took the form of a "Creole" language, linked to colonial penetration. For the Belgians, it was a way of marking their presence and control in a large part of this African territory. Something similar happened in the British African Empire: for example, in Sierra Leone colonial authorities transformed a language (Ibo) into a territory (Iboland), building the unity of Ibo people from an ethnological point of view, through "territorially regimentable language boundaries" (Irvine, 2008: 338). The different processes of linguistic standardisation constituted an important instrument for deeper control over African colonies;
3. Finally, language, especially Western languages, had been used to look down on indigenous people, completing the operation to impose on them a specific,

original identity and culture. It was done in two ways: firstly, by forming a local elite clearly distinguished from the rest of the crowd. Secondly, giving this elite the “right” ideology, based on the superiority of Western civilisation in comparison with the African one. Many authors represented African people and culture in a very negative way. To name just a few of them, it is possible to discuss here philosophers like Hume and Hegel, novelists like Conrad (especially in *Heart of Darkness*), politicians such as Thomas Jefferson (Okolo, 2005), not to mention the British anthropologists or positivist social scientists (Lombroso, for instance) at the end of the 19th century. All of them helped create a very negative image of Africa and Africans, so that, in our common language, the word “black” is constantly related to “evil, bad, dirty”, while white connotes honesty, cleanliness and beautiful people (Idem). But there are examples of “enlightened” colonisers who tried to use the conative way of communication in its proper sense. In the Portuguese administration in Mozambique, for example, some administrators thought that persuasion could be used in order to educate native people. The case of Manuel Dias Belchior is very significant: he stated that it was necessary to carry out “*uma política inteligentemente persuasiva*” (“an intelligently persuasive policy”), in order to elevate Africans’ level of civilisation and production capacity (Belchior, 1951: 132). In this case, Africans had to learn from the European colonisers; they, in their turn, had to use persuasion (and not imposition) to implement their colonial strategies. So, in a harder or softer way, images of inferiority have been continuously inculcated into African people. Today, a large proportion of African elites tend to reproduce this language in order to control local people and to continue a dialogue with the former colonisers.

3.3. *The rebirth of an African type of communication at the time of the struggle for independence.*

The struggle for the liberation of African countries has a deep relationship with the evolution of communication and its functions. It was a great challenge, not only from a political point of view, but especially from a cultural perspective. Some of the historical leaders of the African independence movements, such as Julius Nyerere, knew perfectly well that the current objective had to be to build a different model of society, using an “alternative” kind of communication. In this sense, the Arusha Declaration of Ujamaa and self-reliance (1967) is a good example of a new African paradigm of communication. In Tanzania serious attempts have been made to make communication appropriate to the socio-economic reality, shifting from a centrifugal structure of communication to a centripetal one, directly involving grassroots (Ansu-Kyere-meh, 1997). This type of communication, experienced in Tanzania, could be valid in a large area of Africa, as Des Wilson pointed out, suggesting that “the major goal of traditional communication is reinforcing the bonds of community cooperation” (Wilson, 2008: 51).

Mozambique went through a very similar experience. Here too the people, especially peasants, were involved in a “participant communication”: they had to understand that the struggle was the only way to obtain freedom; they participated actively in the discussion, transmitting to Frelimo’s leaders a clear idea of what liberation was and needed to be in their rural regions. The peasants and the young people who had received their instruction in the free zones became the new teachers, in a circular process in which it was almost impossible to say who was the teacher and who was the student. In South Africa, during the anti-apartheid struggle, music became a pivotal means of communication between resistances. This particular kind of communication had two tasks: on the one hand, it induced the struggle, since it was “upbeat and energetic” (Vershbow, 2002: 3); on the other, it stimulated a sense of community and solidarity, accompanied generally by “a dance consisting of foot stomping and spontaneous chanting” (Idem: 3). Some singers became the symbols of the resistance struggle, such as Vuyisile Mini, with his *Ndademnyama we Verwoerd* (“Watch Out, Vervoerd”), directed to Hendrik Vervoerd, the Prime Minister of South Africa between 1958 and 1966. So the unification of phatic and conative functions can be encountered in militant music during apartheid. “To strengthen, mobilise, and unify a community”: these were the main tasks of this specific kind of communication in that particular context (Idem: 3). The same concept is stressed by Makky, who argues that, especially after the Sharpeville massacre (1960), music became an important weapon in the fight against apartheid; however, it never failed to perform the function of uniting the resistances “as brothers and sisters on their journey to end apartheid” (Makky, 2007: 10). At this pivotal stage, African communication suffered an important transformation: anchored to the objectives of the movements that fought for liberation, it was impossible to return to the origins. So the phatic function was recuperated, especially in rural areas, but a strong influence of the conative one had already infiltrated the African people. The national struggle movements had to find equilibrium between these two functions of language. It meant balancing the traditional features related to the rebirth of a sense of community and solidarity, broken during the colonial experience, with the aim of building a new, African nation-state, whose type of communication had to be able to aid a convergence of all people towards development policies. This mixture had many difficulties, provoking a growing misunderstanding between new African elites and lay people.

3.4 New problems: communication in independent African states.

In the anti-colonial or anti-apartheid experience, a very serious attempt to “popularise” and “democratise” language was been carried out, besides the “myth” of participant communication. However, the post-colonial type of communication reflected the process of centralisation and, in many cases, lacked an authentic democratic spirit. As Talcott Parsons pointed out, speaking about the former Soviet Union (Parsons, 1951), each revolutionary process tends to shift towards a predetermined power whose main objective is to manage and maintain the new equilibrium. In many cases, such as Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau or South Africa itself, after the conquest of freedom and independence, the mentality of the new elites became

conservative: they imposed “the line” on people. Therefore, the prevalent perception of lay people, in particular peasants, was that new chiefs had replaced the old colonisers. What Yves Benot wrote in 1969 is very interesting: he set out that the majority of the African debates were presented with the aim of excluding the masses, provoking a situation that was the opposite of the independence struggles, when the strategy had been to involve all people actively (Benot, 1969: 378).

As African history is strictly connected to the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the model of communication in the new, young African nations depended on the development policies implemented by Europe and United States. It is possible, here, to trace just a short frame in relation to the subdivision of the first phase of development in Africa.

- During the “first decade” of development (the 1960s), the idea – well represented by the theory of the economic growth stages formulated by Rostow – was to carry out technological investments and to induce economic growth, repeating an experience that had had great success: the Marshall Plan (ERP) for the rebirth of Europe, immediately after the end of the Second World War. It was meant to be a “copy-paste” of the European lifestyle into the African context, involving the transfer of capital and technology, “but also the communication of ideas, knowledge, and skills to make possible the successful adoption of innovation” (Melkote and Steeves, 2001: 54). The flow of communication had to be unidirectional and had to induce persuasion. The results were very bad. In Guinea-Conakry, in 1961, the peasants were unhappy with the politics of Sekou-Touré and his collaborators, since they took decisions, while the peasants had only to obey (Idem, 1969). Communication became vertical, top-down, excluding any forms of opposition or debates from African public opinion. In a word, communication took the form of a directive, conative order, without any opportunity for discussion and co-decision-making. A new form of colonial communication was perpetrated through African politicians.
- In the “second decade of development” (the 1970s), it was clear that this kind of communication was ineffective. New conceptions of development began to circulate, emphasising the idea that economic growth may not be the only way to help Africa to combat poverty, giving new value to cultural and religious factors and proposing a more sustainable pattern of development. The Conference of the United Nations on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972 or the limits of development formulated by the Club of Rome are just two of the examples that reveal this new trend. In terms of communication, the main result of this second decade of development was the publication of the MacBride Report, in 1980 (MacBride, 1980). This report emphasises the role of local actors and local means of communication, using, for the first time, qualified African people to serve as a bridge in order to cover “the gap between the technical specialists (...) and potential users” (Melkote and Steeves, 2001: 62). In this case, the strategy for development – especially after the launch of structural adjustment programmes – continues to be defined by the internatio-

nal community, while communication for development (an expression used for the first time by Nora Quebral at the beginning of the 1980s) is made together with local specialists, trained in the United States. But the 1980s have been defined as the “lost decade of development”, with tragic economic and social situations in almost all African countries. For this reason, at the end of this period, Moemeka stresses the need to consolidate a new concept of communication: “Our concept of Communication, which I call the humanized, democratic, interactive model, places emphasis on how people use communication or messages. It stresses genuine dialogue, free and proportionated opportunity to exert mutual influences and rejects the idea that persuasion is the chief role of communication. Here, feedback is imperative” (Moemeka, 1989: 5).

- In the 1980s, and yet more in the following decade, new attempts to change the model of communication for development were carried out. For instance, great emphasis was given to community radios in Africa, in parallel with the wave of democratisation and liberalisation. But in many African states, community radios serve as the operational arm of the respective government, stripping them of their main function of favouring the participation of local people in local authorities’ decision-making processes. It seems that the traditional, phatic function of communication, typical of African societies, has been overcome by the conative one in the neo-colonial era, also thanks to the strong interests of the dominant elite, which, in most cases, governs with the goal of favouring its economic interests at the expense of lay people (Todorov, 1999; Fabian, 1986). As a final step, many African scholars admit, today, that “the basic structure of communication is still the top-down control system of the colonial period”, the major feature of which is to reduce lay people to a condition of silence and “non-communication” (White, 2008: 7). With the failure of the project based on self-reliance or on more radical ideas of society, Africa entered a tragic crisis. Sub-development causes an increase in dependence on the international community, so that native people – with the exception of the elite – can only listen, trying to understand the decisions others have taken for them, and perform the commands. The weakness in the field of communication, then, is two-fold: it continues to be vertical and unidirectional, which is strongly conative, but also “external”. The failures have been evident and serious, also caused by the “hunger for power” of African politicians and bureaucrats (Mongula, 2008: 15). It is enough to think of the problems of malaria, AIDS, and the very policies of rural development, only to mention some of the most prominent issues, which remain unresolved today. For instance, in Mozambique, one of the countries worst affected by AIDS in the world, there is the following, paradoxical situation: in the south, where the concentration of propaganda and campaigns for the struggle against AIDS is very high, the rate of infection is also very high and has increased in recent years; in the north, where such efforts are weaker, the rate of infection is quite low and has been diminishing lately. It could be possible to conclude, again

paradoxically, that there is a statistical and positive relationship between the investment in anti-AIDS propaganda and increases in this disease...

For these reasons, many efforts are being made today to enter a new stage of the communication paradigm in Africa, a stage in which international donors and local politicians have understood that African problems have to be solved through an African type of communication, focused on people and their concrete necessities and aspirations: in short, a phatic kind of communication that is community-oriented.

Persuasion and mass manipulation, in many fields, are now the reference points for the African paradigm of communication, often associated with concealing information: but this is in strong opposition to the African culture and way of life. So, what will it be possible to do to start changes, transforming communication into a tool of public liberation, rather than one of mental, political, cultural and economic modern slavery?

This answer has to be left to African studies researchers and to new reflections on communication in contemporary Africa.

4. Final Remarks

This article has tried to show how communication has been an important but at the same time neglected factor in African history. Through an analysis based on Jakobson's functionalist perspective, a new scenario has emerged: Western colonialism has had a prominent role not only in determining the future of African societies and economy, but has also strongly influenced native people's daily ways of life, starting with the manner in which they communicate. The community dimension, typical of the traditional phatic function of African communication, has been replaced by the conative one, which is much more directive and functional to the implementation of political and economic goals. When the struggles for liberating Africa appeared, the phatic dimension once again had a pivotal role, although mixed with a more directive and interventionist approach, which aimed to reach political independence. The new African states failed in their mission, in general: they did not involve lay people in the process of making strategic decisions for their future, applying instead directive communication. When, in the 1970s, the economic crisis in a large number of African states revealed all its dramatic nature, once again the external intervention established – and carried out, via the IMF and WB – a “nullification” of the dialogue between governors and governed. The phatic dimension of African communication continued to be neglected, causing serious problems for the solidity of local communities, which is still linked to this kind of communication.

The shift of the conception and practice of communication in current Africa from a phatic to a persuasive function represents a part of a more general transformation in the relationships between governors and governed. Trust in government, in Africa, is under 40%, and this dissatisfaction is strictly related to corruption, a pervasive

phenomenon in this continent (Blind, 2006: 10). Politics directed to involve lay people in strategic, crucial choices for their future are very rare. As Asante pointed out, hearership should characterize communication in Africa, especially from the point of view of governors (Asante, 2003). But economic interests, corruption and the voracity of ruling classes prevailed in detriment of the sense of community and a phatic conception of communication, which in origin, represented the mark of distinction of African society. So, it is possible to speak of a new form of colonialism carried out by African ruling classes, in which persuasive or no communication at all characterizes the relationships with African people.

As a literary text confirms, to have forgotten a communitarian kind of communication has provoked frustration in African people. Trying to explain the participation of people in violent and apparently senseless riots in South Africa, one of the two protagonists of a dialogue answers: “It is rooted in a helpless frustration with not being seen, not being heard as human beings by the authority that governs over them (which also explains why there is all this talk of ungovernability). Think about it, when you have been saying the same thing to the same people for years and years (‘we want houses, we want electricity, we want schools, we want public transport’) but have been time and again plagued by a justified and overwhelming feeling that the addressees are not even hearing what you are saying, let alone acting on it, wouldn’t you at some point draw the conclusion that you and them are speaking two different languages, that they do not understand you, that they are blind to you” (Barnard-Naude, 2013). Only deep reflection by African studies researchers will be able to overcome this complicated situation, stimulating international actors and local politicians to modify their philosophy of intervention, providing enough room for other forms of communication.

5. References

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