

## Exploring indigenous communication strategies for championing development initiatives: A review of the role of drama, folk songs and poetry

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### Abstract

Indigenous communication, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, is pivotal in fostering community development and social change. This paper explores the multifaceted realm of Indigenous communication, focusing on folk songs, drama, and poetry and their contributions to global development efforts. Drawing from a comprehensive literature review and insights from communication specialists, the study investigates the characteristics, roles, applications, and impact of these traditional communication forms. The review highlights that drama is a collaborative platform for portraying real-life issues, fostering communication skills, promoting democratic values, and enhancing social awareness. Folk songs, transmitted orally across generations, celebrate cultural identity, preserve historical events, and convey important messages on social issues and public health. Through its expressive and reflective nature, poetry catalyzes social change, engaging individuals in dialogue and promoting empathy and critical thinking. The paper recommends incorporating Indigenous communication methods into development initiatives to ensure cultural resonance and accessibility for target communities. The paper highlights the transformative potential of Indigenous communication in promoting inclusive development and fostering societal cohesion. Ultimately, it contributes to the discourse on communication for social change, offering insights into leveraging Indigenous communication to benefit rural communities and development practitioners.

**Keywords:** Communication skills; Community development; Democratic values; Social awareness; Social change.

### 1. Introduction

Soil: "indigenous" refers to a specific area's original or earliest inhabitants (Mbakogu, 2015). In terms of communication, "indigenous" refers to communication methods and systems that the earliest inhabitants of a particular area developed. Indigenous communication, deeply rooted in specific cultures, can be understood as a complex system of conveying messages. It emerges within a particular cultural context, intertwining that culture's symbols, values, ethics, and structures.

Ansu (1998) suggests that Indigenous communication takes shape through unique characteristics, providing a distinct pathway for conveying meaning. N'gombe (2000) elaborates on this, describing Indigenous communication as the vital means through which everyday people, particularly rural farmers, express themselves. In this context, communication becomes a grassroots effort intimately tied to community life and experiences. Building upon this, Abdulai *et al.* (2023) offer a comprehensive view, defining Indigenous communication as a network of systems intentionally created by rural communities. These systems help generate, store, share, and communicate information and apply this knowledge to navigate daily challenges.


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Received: May 15, 2024; Accepted: July 10, 2024;

Published online: July 14, 2024.

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Indigenous communication isn't just about transmitting information; it is a dynamic, culturally embedded process seamlessly woven into daily life, reflecting community, tradition, and shared experiences.

Indigenous communication enables ethnic communities to uphold their customs, values, ethos, and culture (Adesoji and Ogunjimi, 2015). It's deeply rooted in people's lives, relying on local technologies and using symbols familiar to the community. Traditional culture forms the foundation of Indigenous communication, aligning closely with customs and language, making it challenging for outsiders to understand (Osho, 2011). Despite its traditional appearance, indigenous communication remains crucial, especially for rural populations, often neglected by modern media. It serves as a vital tool for driving social change among rural communities, which comprise a significant portion of the population in many developing countries (Ushe, 2015).

Indigenous communication media are the tools ordinary people, especially those in rural areas, use to share their messages, varying across different cultures (Adeniyi, 2019). These channels, intrinsic to each culture, pass information from one generation to another. These channels include folk traditions, observation, interaction, informal methods, storytelling, visual arts, performances like concerts and drumming, interpersonal channels, plays, use of proverbs, songs, dances, native languages, and cultural resources (Edet *et al.*, 2015). There are several forms of Indigenous communication, as identified by Oyesomi *et al.* (2014): Folk media, Indigenous organizations, deliberate instruction, information channels, records, and direct observation. Nwosu (2013) categorizes them into idiophones (self-sounding instruments), membranophones (drums), aerophones (wind instruments), symblography (graphic symbols), signals (signs like drumbeats), objectifies (objects conveying messages), colour schemes, music songs, extra-mundane

communication (spiritual rituals), and symbolic displays (expressions and gestures).

Despite the rise of modern media, Indigenous communication systems persist and remain vital sources of information for rural communities (Ayangunna and Oyewo, 2014). These systems offer cost-effective, locally tailored solutions to development challenges and can be integrated with scientific knowledge to enhance productivity and living standards. Due to their local control and familiarity, indigenous channels are highly trusted. Informal interpersonal interactions, facilitated by Indigenous communication, play a crucial role in persuading people to adopt or reject innovations. Moreover, Indigenous communication enables local communities to communicate internally and with development professionals and policymakers, allowing them to maintain control over local media more effectively compared to technology-driven platforms. According to Osho (2011), traditional media are essential for meeting rural populations' information needs and serve as channels for driving change, particularly in farming communities where knowledge transfer primarily occurs through familial networks and personal experimentation.

Indigenous communication facilitates local participation in development by enabling rural communities to engage with each other and with development experts using familiar methods (Fab-Ukozor and Etumnu, 2022). Adeniyi (2019) emphasizes that Indigenous communication plays a pivotal role in achieving development goals focused on enhancing the quality of life and well-being, as it enhances knowledge sharing and speeds up the adoption of innovations desired by the people (Fab-Ukozor and Etumnu, 2022). Local communities prefer it because it combines verbal and nonverbal communication methods, making it more accessible and effective. Additionally, Indigenous communication methods are cost-effective and serve as an alternative means for grassroots communities to connect with others in the modern age,

complementing mass and new media platforms. Even with the presence of modern media, communities still utilize town criers to disseminate important information, and Indigenous communication media are employed to reinforce messages from mass media, ensuring inclusive communication (Osho, 2011).

Recognizing that rural populations often rely on interpersonal networks rather than the media for information on new technology, Mbakogu (2015) highlights a need for more adequate research on Indigenous communication. Moreover, while acknowledging the significance of these methods in community engagement and development initiatives, there is a notable gap in understanding their specific roles and effectiveness, particularly in areas such as drama, folk songs, and poetry. This paper aims to bridge this gap by conducting a comprehensive literature review to examine how these traditional communication forms are utilized and their impact on development projects. This paper delves into the multifaceted realm of Indigenous communication, focusing on its pivotal role in community development and social change. By doing so, it seeks to offer insights into the potential of leveraging Indigenous communication to improve the effectiveness and cultural resonance of development interventions for the benefit of both rural residents and community workers or policymakers. Through a comprehensive review of literature and insights from communication specialists, this paper illuminates the transformative potential of Indigenous communication in fostering inclusive development for rural communities, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on communication for social change.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The study employs the quasi-normative theory of indigenous knowledge communication (Manyozo, 2018). This theory is drawn from the normative theory, which discusses the usage of

modern modes of communication. The quasi-normative theory recognizes that indigenous knowledge is in constant contact and conflict (not necessarily antagonistic) with post-enlightenment Western knowledge and science. As such, it must undergo modification and transformation to maintain its value as an agent in the development of society in this modern era.

This study also employs the modernization theory of development. The concept being discussed here is a gradual shift from a "pre-modern" or "traditional" society to a "modern" one. German sociologist Max Weber's theories served as the inspiration for modernization theory (1864-1979). The idea examines a nation's internal dynamics while presuming that "traditional" nations can achieve progress with support, much like more developed nations have. It aims to explain the process of social evolution and pinpoint the social elements that influence the advancement and development of societies. Both the process of change and the reactions to it are emphasized by modernization theory. The hypothesis says traditional communities will change as they integrate more modern practices. It is also believed that people can develop and change their societies themselves.

Drama is a collaborative performance experience where participants portray real-life issues (Adıgüzel, 2017). It serves multiple purposes, acting not only as an educational tool but also as a form of artistic expression and cultural education (Adıgüzel and Timuçin, 2010). Adıgüzel (2017) outlined the broad objectives of drama, including enhancing communication skills, fostering a democratic attitude, improving language proficiency and nonverbal expression, promoting self-awareness and self-actualization, encouraging aesthetic appreciation, cultivating critical thinking and creativity, fostering cooperation and collaboration, increasing social awareness, and promoting healthy emotional and sensory control. Drama is an effective and valuable strategy commonly utilized for enhancing communication and social skills

(Haneem *et al.*, 2022; Ulubey, 2018).

Folk songs are traditional melodies intrinsic to a society. Alam *et al.* (2023) contend that these songs are customary tunes passed orally within a community or cultural group across generations, often embodying a particular community's beliefs, ideals, traditions, and folklore. Typically, folk songs are simple compositions intended for public enjoyment rather than professional performance and are transmitted orally rather than being written down. They are passed on through what is described as "hand-me-down, home-made" in words and music. Originally, folk songs were crafted by everyday people (Oghiator, 2014). Serving as a unifying force across diverse backgrounds, folk songs foster a sense of communal identity, promoting social cohesion. They also play a crucial role in preserving cultural knowledge by serving as a vehicle for imparting historical events, moral teachings, and cultural norms to younger generations.

Gold (2012) stated that poetry serves as a means of interpreting lived experiences, engaging in dialogue with one's surroundings, and giving voice to feelings and thoughts that may be difficult to express otherwise. Caronan (2015) suggests that poetry encompasses various oral traditions, ranging from structured verse to free-flowing, rhythmic cadence, thus embodying diverse forms and functions. Whether written or spoken, poetry intersects with music, drama, art, and performance, blurring the boundaries between song and narrative, activism and creativity. Within these blurred boundaries, hybrid forms of expression and meaning-making emerge, many of which incorporate poetic elements (Dillon, 2022). Simecek and Rumbold (2016) assert that poetry holds significance as it demonstrates how humans use language to explore and understand their environment.

### 3. Research methodology

This paper endeavours to explore the

characteristics, roles, applications, and contributions of folk songs, drama, and poetry to global development efforts, drawing from available literature and interviews with communication specialists. Academic publications on these topics were gathered from platforms such as 'Google Scholar,' 'ScienceDirect,' and 'PubMed,' utilizing search terms like "folk songs" or "folk culture." Key terms such as folk songs, drama, and poetry were instrumental in retrieving relevant literature.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Drama

Engaging in drama stimulates deep, participatory, and reflective cognitive processes while enhancing communication skills (McCaslin and Schonmann, 2006). It also instils democratic values such as human rights appreciation, tolerance, reconciliation, equity, engagement and liberty (Karatas and Oral, 2015). By fostering a democratic and tolerant atmosphere, drama facilitates active and enjoyable learning experiences, allowing individuals to tackle real-life issues through role-playing and improvisation (Aykac, 2014). Drama is a tool for simplifying and understanding complex real-world situations through enactment (Önder, 2007). Various techniques, including role-play, improvisation, interviews, pantomime, hot seating, gossip circles, writing in character, tableau, inner voice, ceremonies, phone calls, and role cards can be employed during drama activities (Bowell and Heap, 2013; Ackroyd and Barter-Boulton, 2012). These activities aim to develop communication and problem-solving skills and foster imagination, creativity, observation, self-awareness, and collaboration (Walker *et al.*, 2011).

Literature suggests that drama is closely linked to the psychological aspect of inclusion, as it can significantly contribute to emotional development (Gul and Caglayan, 2017) and self-confidence (Asimidou *et al.*, 2021). Additionally,

drama serves as an effective means for individuals to express their thoughts and emotions (Isyar and Akay, 2017). When properly designed and delivered, drama has the potential to enhance social skills by tapping into psychological and social mechanisms (Layachi *et al.*, 2024). In the context of African liberation struggles, drama has historically played a pivotal role, particularly in post-colonial times, by addressing the challenge of integrating diverse ethnic groups within nations. Across Africa, drama has been utilized as a means of protest and resistance against oppressive regimes. For instance, drama and songs in South Africa were instrumental in mobilizing people to oppose racial discrimination and demand social transformation (Umenyilorah, 2014). Roy and Dock (2014) highlight that drama, as a collaborative rather than a competitive approach, can alleviate the fear of rejection and failure.

Studies have investigated the impact of drama on several areas. For example, effects of drama on students' academic performance (Kılıçaslan and Vural, 2018), emotional traits (Aykaç *et al.*, 2019), attitudes towards verbal communication skills, foreign language learning, and intercultural communication abilities (Iamsaard and Kerdpol, 2015; Belliveau and Kim, 2013), collaboration, communication, and creativity (Lee *et al.*, 2015), as well as overall academic achievement (Batdi and Batdi, 2015). All these studies revealed a positive impact. Other benefits include enhancements in cognitive and behavioural aspects of social competence and communication among students with Autism (Beadle-Brown *et al.*, 2018; Corbett *et al.*, 2019). In determining drama's impact on social communication skills using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, Batdi and Elaldi (2020) argue that drama has a multifaceted positive influence, extending beyond social communication skills alone. Their findings suggest that drama positively affects various domains, including social, cognitive, and emotional aspects, while also improving learning

environments and course delivery. Additionally, they assert that drama also promotes collaborative work within groups and facilitates the initiation and maintenance of relationships while simultaneously fostering social skills such as self-control.

Layachi *et al.* (2024) reveal the positive influence of drama on the social development of students diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Their findings suggest that involvement in drama activities significantly improves various social aspects, including peer interactions, social acceptance, a sense of belonging, and friendships. This highlights the potential of drama-based interventions in addressing the social hurdles commonly encountered by students with ADHD. Furthermore, they advocate for integrating drama techniques into educational settings to enhance the social inclusion of children with ADHD in mainstream classrooms. By facilitating engagement in drama activities, educators can cultivate environments that foster acceptance and a sense of belonging for students, thereby facilitating their integration into classroom communities. The study highlights the capacity of drama-based interventions to positively influence the social development and inclusion of students with ADHD.

Deepali (2020) highlights the significance of drama as a powerful instrument for cultivating reflective skills, constructive thinking, and problem-solving acumen crucial for national development. Additionally, drama's influence transcends individual benefits, fostering societal cohesion and encouraging active citizenship through collective endeavours for positive transformation. Participants in drama activities develop a spectrum of social competencies, encompassing comprehension of societal issues, empathy, teamwork, emotional regulation and leadership, which collectively contribute to their holistic social development. Empirical research corroborates the efficacy of drama-based interventions in augmenting social perception

and interaction, highlighting drama's pivotal role in nurturing social aptitudes and fostering favourable attitudes towards community engagement.

#### **4.2. Folksongs**

Folk songs serve as a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, tackling social issues. They showcase diverse cultures and strengthen community ties, instilling a sense of pride and belonging. Overall, folk media is central to the way of life, connecting individuals to their heritage and serving as a dynamic expression of cultural identity (Ashutosh and Alam, 2023). Folk songs celebrate themes of moral righteousness, emphasizing the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness, and the enduring human values that are universally cherished and preserved (Ramkissoon, 2005). According to Reid (2001), folk songs are employed in liturgical and private worship to align individuals' actions, emotions, and thoughts with their traditions' understanding of transcendent truth. Folk or traditional performances embody the essence of community spirit, collective thought, and familial bonds, reflecting societal aspirations and development trajectories. These performances play a vital role in enriching the community's spiritual, physical, aesthetic, and philosophical fabric. Furthermore, they serve as potent tools for identity formation, with each folk performance encapsulating the emblematic characteristics of the people or society from which it originates. Folk songs, in particular, are the spontaneous creations of cultural members, born from experiences of adversity, moments of joy and sorrow, and witnessing significant historical events, which are encapsulated in songs often revisited during annual festivities (Omosule, 2021). Passed down orally from generation to generation, folk songs typically mirror the traditions and beliefs of their respective regions, with authorship attributed not to individuals but to the collective community.

Folk songs serve as rich repositories of local

experiences, reflecting various aspects of the community's environment, including spiritual journeys, social rituals, labour activities, leisure pursuits, religious practices, cultural expressions, and everyday routines. A significant characteristic of folk songs is their communal ownership, with no individual claiming sole credit for their creation (Omosule, 2021). Moreover, folk songs play a pivotal role in communicating messages to people, aiding in their retention and motivating action (Smith *et al.*, 2022). They have proven effective in enhancing public health knowledge and behaviours (Sheffield and Irons, 2021), particularly in educating children and adolescents about oral health practices (Shetty *et al.*, 2013). Utilizing familiar tunes for toothbrushing songs has successfully made oral health education engaging and accessible (Shetty *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, incorporating songs as reminders for regular brushing fosters a fun and interactive activity that can be shared between parents, guardians, and children daily. In a study investigating the efficacy of folk songs as a tool for oral hygiene education among children, Fagbule *et al.* (2023) emphasize that folk songs are widely accepted means of message conveyance, suggesting that using them to deliver oral health messages could be an effective, acceptable, and sustainable method among children.

Songs performed by the Gaine tailor-musician caste have long served as a form of 'living newspapers.' This group has upheld the tradition of crafting songs that narrate royal lineage, paying homage to monarchs, and recounting heroic deeds alongside commentary on contemporary events. Recently, there has been a rise in male/female song 'competitions' within this tradition. Moreover, folk songs are frequently utilized to convey information on pressing matters such as forestry, conservation, HIV/AIDS, challenges in natural resource management, and maternal health (Lugar, 2009). Arts-based learning programs are integral to the

curriculum in Canada and numerous Australian and American schools, where efforts have been made to integrate music education with other subjects. These programs offer compelling evidence of the profound impact of songs on children's development (Nwokenna and Anike, 2013).

Yellamma songs enjoy widespread popularity among the rural communities of northern Karnataka in central South India. These songs, sung in praise of Goddess Yellamma, resonate particularly with impoverished individuals from large families. Consequently, there was a deliberate decision to incorporate family planning messages into the song lyrics. Post-independence, the Indian government utilized folk genres like Maharashtra and Burrakatha as educational tools for rural audiences. Maharashtra integrates music, dance, and drama to impart lessons on cooperative efforts, self-reliance, rural development, family planning, and national savings, while Burrakatha, a prevalent ballad singing style in Andhra Pradesh, serves as a medium for chronicling people's activities, customs, social practices, and aspirations for the future (Lent, 2019).

In the political realm, many leaders and political parties have found traditional music to be an effective tool for conveying their slogans and communicating with the entire nation. The lyrics convey messages that resonate with the common citizen as well as politicians, allowing the electorate to understand what their candidate stands for before casting their votes. Consequently, indigenous music is considered the most effective means of reaching all segments of society, whether in rural or urban areas (Jayeola, 2015).

#### **4.3. Poetry**

Poetry provides structure and significance to our experiences, leading us through familiar territories while encouraging exploration of the unfamiliar. Its role is not merely to uncritically endorse the world or agree with its flaws but to

foster reconciliation on a broader scale, guiding us affectionately through the realm of imagination and back to the boundaries of our human existence (Alexander, 2013). While primarily enjoyed for entertainment and relaxation, poetry also serves additional purposes, such as preserving traditional customs, norms, and values and transmitting cultural history from one generation to the next. Furthermore, poetry can serve as a means of preserving historical events and experiences (Adepegba, 2006).

Poetry acts as a powerful tool for catalyzing social change (Falade, 2013), fostering awareness and comprehension. When poets address significant social issues like equality, justice, or the environment, they illuminate these topics, prompting deep reflection and emotional engagement. Poetry can speak directly to the heart, capturing emotions and experiences in a way that straightforward facts or arguments often cannot. When individuals encounter poems addressing social issues, it motivates them to perceive the world from a new perspective and perhaps even take action to effect positive change. Thus, poetry transcends mere eloquence; it catalyzes change and is a force for making a meaningful impact on the world.

Poetry is seen as a valuable means to help students express their emotions and thoughts, allowing them to choose appropriate language to articulate their feelings (Nurhadi, 2017). According to Zakaria (2022) and Fynn and Ndlovu (2024), young learners exhibit enthusiastic engagement with their learning when poetry is incorporated into the curriculum, finding it stimulating and enjoyable. Additionally, they observed that the use of poetry in teaching contributes to the development of language skills, particularly in English, and encourages active participation in classroom activities. This study echoes these positive findings, suggesting that poetry can similarly enhance the learning process. Research by Nair (2015), Pollack and Korol (2013), and Vardell

and Wong (2019) highlight how poetry enables students to creatively express their understanding of the material. Furthermore, integrating poetry with core content has been shown to increase student engagement, moving them beyond the passive reception of knowledge or information (Paiva *et al.*, 2013).

Poetry serves as a means for scientists to engage, learn, and generate new ideas by allowing them to step back from immediate problems (Januchowski-Hartley *et al.*, 2018). Particularly in its shorter forms, poetry enables scientists to swiftly capture and express novel ideas, as Pollack and Korol (2013) demonstrated in their use of poetry to convey neurobiological concepts focusing on key observed processes succinctly. Poetry provides scientists with a platform to manipulate language, reframe concepts, and utilize aesthetics to captivate readers in ways not achievable through scientific articles (Silverman, 2016). In fields such as social work, poetry has been utilized to support reflective practice, enabling the exploration of professional and ethical dilemmas in real-world scenarios. For instance, Gold (2012) illustrates how poetic narratives and scholarly reflections offer practitioners and educators a valuable tool to navigate the ethical complexities and ambiguities inherent in everyday practice. Similarly, in healthcare research, Hopkinson (2015) employs poetry to reflect on nurses' experiences, facilitating profound reflective dialogues about practice that uncover suppressed emotions and foster empathy. She contends that practice-based poems hold a legitimate position in healthcare action research and provide insights beneficial to other practice-oriented professions.

Healy and Smyth (2017) advocate for the integration of poetry into educational settings and provide practical guidance for educators on its implementation. Similarly, Cronin and Hawthorne (2019) investigate the benefits of classroom-based poetry writing activities in fostering students' development as writers and reflective practitioners, highlighting the

enhancement of writing craft and reflective skills. Their findings emphasize how poetry writing enables students to articulate complex emotions related to their professional domains, offering valuable insights into the experiences of healthcare workers. Chan (2017) incorporates poetry into teaching activities for student nurses to explore artistic expression, identifying various transferable skills acquired by students such as cooperation, creativity, stress management, enhanced memory, and professional knowledge. Lewis (2018) reported that Haiku poetry writing sessions facilitated the development of critical thinking skills among pathophysiology students.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper comprehensively explores the significance of Indigenous communication methods, particularly drama, folk songs, and poetry, in various contexts ranging from education to social change and community development. It was found that drama is multifaceted, serving not only as a tool for educational purposes but also as a means of fostering democratic values, improving communication skills, and promoting social awareness. Drama's ability to engage participants in deep cognitive processes and its effectiveness in addressing real-life issues highlight its importance in both formal and informal learning settings. Similarly, examining folk songs demonstrates how these traditional melodies serve as vehicles for preserving cultural knowledge, promoting social cohesion, and conveying important messages on topics such as public health and environmental conservation. The communal ownership and oral transmission of folk songs further emphasize their role in connecting individuals to their cultural heritage. The capacity of poetry to catalyze social change, foster emotional expression, and enhance learning experiences in diverse contexts was highlighted. Whether in educational settings, scientific research, or healthcare practice, poetry



emerges as a powerful medium for reflection, communication, and creative expression. The paper contributes valuable insights into the rich tapestry of Indigenous communication methods and their relevance in contemporary society. By recognizing the cultural significance and communicative potential of drama, folk songs, and poetry, the paper highlights the importance of embracing diverse forms of expression to promote understanding, engagement, and social transformation.

Development initiatives are recommended to incorporate Indigenous communication methods such as drama, folk songs, and poetry into their frameworks to ensure cultural resonance and accessibility for target communities. Capacity building and training programs should be invested in to equip community workers, development professionals, and policymakers with the knowledge and skills to utilize these methods effectively. Collaborative partnerships with local artists, cultural practitioners, and community leaders should be fostered to co-create and implement communication initiatives using indigenous methods, ensuring better alignment with target communities' specific needs and preferences. Furthermore, development agencies and governments should allocate resources to support initiatives utilizing Indigenous communication methods, including funding for cultural events, community theatre productions, folk music festivals, and poetry workshops, which serve as platforms for promoting Indigenous art forms and facilitating community dialogue.

#### **Authors' Contributions**

*All authors contributed to this research.*

#### **Funding**

*The authors received no funding for this research.*

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

*The authors disclosed no conflict of interest.*

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