

Communicative Acts Beneath the Tree of Palaver: Deciphering Participatory Mechanisms of Community Meaning and Shared Goals

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Abstract

The African tree of palaver represents a coalescence of symbol, language, philosophy, and tradition. As a natural gathering site for social interactions, storytelling, conflict resolution, and community education, it parallels civic spaces such as the plaza, zócalo, agora, and Habermas's public sphere. Beyond its physical shade, it provides a social and psychological canopy under which community members perform communicative acts that construct meaning and cohesion. This paper qualitatively explores the communicative acts enacted under the tree of palaver, deciphering how and why these acts are performed and identifying participatory mechanisms that nurture community-shared goals.

Keywords: palaver tree, communicative acts, symbolic interactionism, participatory communication, community-shared goals

INTRODUCTION

The African tree of palaver is more than a botanical presence. It is a social architecture and communicative organism. It symbolizes the intersection of tradition, philosophy, and linguistic performance, serving as a gathering place for dialogue, storytelling, and reconciliation. It functions as an indigenous public sphere, similar to the agora of ancient Greece or the zócalo in Latin America, offering both comfort and community under its shade.

This study aims to decipher and interpret communicative acts under the tree of palaver through the lens of symbolic interactionism and participatory communication theory. By examining performative communication acts, the paper situates the palaver tree as a dynamic participatory mechanism that nurtures collective well-being and community-shared goals. It further coalesces and clashes ideas for both palaver tree with Habermas's Public Sphere understanding and it ends with challenges that palaver tree faces.

Rationale

Human beings are inherently organizational. Whether in formal or informal associations, religious, secular, or communal, every organization emerges from a shared goal realized through communicative interaction. This shared goal unfolds through three interrelated stages: organizing, organized, and organization.

- Organizing refers to the process of coordinating interactions within a social collective.
- Organized denotes the structured coordination that results.
- Organization is the stable entity produced through both.

In all these stages, communication plays a constitutive role. The communicative model adopted by members mirrors the organization's structure and culture. These models may be transmission-based, interactive, transactional, or participatory, each reflecting evolving understandings of human communication.

The Transmission Model of Communication

The transmission model, rooted in Shannon's (1948) *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*, conceptualizes message flow as a one-way process from sender to receiver. Its five key components are source, transmitter, channel, receiver, and destination (Chandler et al., 1948) highlight message precision and signal efficiency (Fiske, 2011).

While pioneering, this model has been criticized for its linear and reductionist nature. Communication is rarely mechanical; it involves feedback, context, and meaning negotiation. This tension between technological precision and human interaction marks the first theoretical clash in communication theory and leads to the interactive model.

The Interactive Model of Communication

The interactive model (Schramm, 1997) conceptualizes communication as a two-way process where participants alternate as senders and receivers. Meaning is co-constructed through feedback loops within social, cultural, and psychological contexts.

This model expands communication's focus from message delivery to relational interaction. Physical context includes environmental factors, while psychological context includes emotions and mental states influencing interpretation.

However, the interactive model retains sequentiality, participants still alternate roles rather than communicate simultaneously. Thus, it coalesces with the transmission model's structural clarity but clashes with real-world simultaneity, setting the stage for the transactional model.

The Transactional Model of Communication

The transactional model (Barnlund, 1970) reframes communication as a simultaneous, co-creative process where communicators generate shared meaning within social and cultural contexts. Participants are not senders or receivers but communicators engaged in constructing social realities (Lune, 2024).

This model coalesces the linear and interactive paradigms while transcending their limitations by highlighting mutual meaning-making and relational interdependence. Communication thus becomes both process and product, shaping self-concepts, relationships, and community.

Yet, transactional theory often underplays power dynamics and cultural asymmetries, where not all voices have equal influence. This tension introduces the participatory model, which centers equity, voice, and cultural contextualization.

The Participatory Model of Communication

The participatory model integrates the strengths of earlier paradigms such as clarity, feedback, and simultaneity, while introducing dialogue, equality, and inclusivity (Servaes & Malikha, 2005). It acknowledges participants as co-creators of meaning and values local knowledge systems.

Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1983) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this model rejects prescriptive communication that robs people of their "word." Participation becomes both a right and a praxis, emphasizing dialogical exchange and empowerment.

In African contexts, the tree of palaver exemplifies participatory communication: a living site of democracy where discourse, ritual, and storytelling merge. Here, communication is not just exchange, it is social performance, conflict mediation, and community construction.

Literature Review

Participatory Communication

Participatory communication is a two-way, context-driven process that involves reciprocal collaboration and engagement of all stakeholders at every level of decision-making, where meaning-making is both shared and negotiated. It emphasizes grassroots participation, fostering dialogue among community members who engage on equal footing to address social and developmental challenges.

Kheerajit and Flor (2013) describe participatory communication as a unifying process that mobilizes stakeholders to cooperatively address environmental and social issues. Similarly, Anaeto and Solo-Anaeto (2010) emphasize active involvement of community members through inclusive and strategic communication. Bessette (2004) defines participatory development communication as a planned activity combining participatory methods with interpersonal and media channels to facilitate cooperation among diverse stakeholders toward a shared goal.

Srampickal (2006) broadens this definition by describing development communication as “the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and human fulfillment” (p. 3).

The rise of participatory development communication, as Musara (2011) observes, emerged from the disillusionment with modernization theory, whose top-down model marginalized local communities. Huesca (2002) similarly critiques development agencies such as USAID for adopting participatory rhetoric while perpetuating manipulative forms of consultation designed to validate externally imposed objectives.

From these critical perspectives, communication emerges as both a tool and a site of struggle—a process that can transform citizens from passive recipients of aid to active agents of self-determination. Van de Fliert (2007) distinguishes between participation in communication—empowering communities to determine their objectives—and participatory communication, emphasizing collective planning and control. Servaes (2005) encapsulates this view, arguing that participatory communication is a social change process that places people at the center of development.

The Palaver Tree: A Living Public Sphere of Dialogue, Space, and Governance

The Palaver Tree represents a distinctively African institution that fuses spatiality, communicative practice, governance, and spirituality into an integrated social system. Scholars frequently compare it to the emancipatory dialogue of Freire, the communicative rationality of Habermas, and the public realm of Arendt, yet the Palaver Tree both converges with and contests these Western constructs. Rather than a metaphor for deliberation, it is a living public sphere where speech, community, and reconciliation are enacted through embodied presence.

Spatiality and the Cultural Production of Publicness

Physically, the Palaver Tree is a communal environment: open, accessible, and rooted in nature. Ali Moussa (2023) emphasizes its accessibility to all members of society, while Ross (2008) describes Senegalese palaver trees as “principal monuments” of non-monumental settlements, places where memory and belonging take physical root. This understanding aligns with Lefebvre’s (2009) theory of socially produced space and Fuchs’ (2018) recognition of space as embedded within power relations.

However, unlike Western conceptions of public space, which often separate symbolic and material functions, the Palaver Tree collapses this boundary: it is at once physical shelter, historical archive, and

affective community (Ross, 2008; Ali Moussa, 2023).

Orality, Memory, and Relational Communication

The Palaver Tree is an epistemic environment structured by orality as the conduit of history, identity, and moral learning. Mucherera (2009) frames it as a place where ancestral narratives are re-interpreted into contemporary context. This mirrors Freire's dialogical pedagogy, wherein knowledge arises through lived experience, not abstract rationality.

Yet, unlike Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, historically exclusive and premised on literate discourse, the Palaver Tree is inclusive through presence, not citizenship. Hierarchies may exist, but all hold the right to speak (Arendt; Habermas). Its communicative ethic is relational rather than procedural: recognition derives from belonging and interdependence.

This highlights a critical friction: deliberation in Western tradition seeks rational-critical argument; deliberation in the Palaver Tree honors emotion, spirituality, and communal identity as legitimate knowledge forms.

Reconciliation, Justice, and the Politics of Words

Under the tree, dialogue is not simply debate, it is a mechanism of social healing. Scheid (2011) and Asese & Ahiokhai (2023) describe its ethic of truth, generosity, and hospitality toward otherness. Justice here is restorative, dialogic, and continuous rather than legalistic and terminal. In Liberia's post-conflict Palaver Hut system, reconciliation occurs through storytelling, confession, and ritual (Pajabo, 2008; Olugbemiga, 2019).

This produces a sharp theoretical rift. Whereas Western models of justice, like courts or transitional tribunals seek closure, the Palaver Tree sustains ongoing coexistence with memory. Peace is relational, not merely institutional.

Thus, African peacebuilding foregrounds harmony over adjudication and community repair over punitive finality.

Hybridization, Spirituality, and Modern Governance

Recent studies argue that the Palaver Tree must evolve without severing its spiritual base. Babo (2018) and Nicaise (2008) show how traditional adjudication coexists with state institutions in Côte d'Ivoire and the DRC. Mulemfo (1996) and Masiala (1986) insist that any modernization must honor the sacred cosmology linking the living and the ancestors.

This spiritual dimension directly challenges the secular assumptions at the core of deliberative democracy (Rawls, Habermas). For African governance, legitimacy is not purely rational-legal; it emerges from radical connectedness—a moral ecology spanning visible and invisible worlds (Asese & Ahiokhai, 2023).

Communicative Governance and the African Public Sphere

Gill et al. (2023) identify open-ended dialogue as the hallmark of African endogenous governance. Bidima (2014) similarly theorizes the Palaver as a deliberative arena anchored in patience and moral repair, contrasted with Western adversarial legalism. Diangitukwa (2014) argues it performs the same democratic functions Habermas idealized, but without abstraction, bureaucracy, or exclusion.

Ingiyimbere (2024) juxtaposes Rawls's public reason with the Palaver's relational ethic: both assume equality, yet the former is grounded in principles while the latter is grounded in embodied participation.

Aliana (2016) calls for “cognitive decentering,” positioning African dialogue systems not as primitive precedents but as intellectual alternatives to hegemonic democratic theory.

Thus, the Palaver Tree bridges and subverts Western governance models: it is at once familiar and disruptive.

Toward a Philosophy of Communicative Coexistence

Collectively, these studies depict the Palaver Tree as a living epistemology, a site where communication is inseparable from social reproduction, environmental symbolism, and spiritual cosmology. It exemplifies a governance model where democracy is practiced through rituals of listening, intergenerational storytelling, and the harmonization of conflict.

If Habermas imagines the public sphere, the Palaver Tree performs it.

If Freire theorizes dialogical liberation, the Palaver ritualizes it.

If Arendt celebrates the space of appearance, the Palaver Tree grounds it in earth and ancestry.

Ultimately, the Palaver Tree contests the Western separation of:

- political vs. spiritual
- rational vs. relational
- human vs. ecological

It reveals that participatory communication is not only about reasoned argument but about renewed coexistence with others, the past, and the land.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis. Data are interpreted hermeneutically to uncover the symbolic meanings of communicative acts under the tree of palaver.

Participants. Fifteen individuals were purposively selected based on age, gender, and knowledge of African traditions. Five were aged 60 and above, five between 40 and 60, and five between 20 and 40; seven were female and eight males.

Data Analysis. Hermeneutic interpretation focused on recurring symbols, metaphors, and communicative behaviors that reflected participatory and performative dynamics within the palaver process.

Research Questions

1. How is communication organized under the tree of palaver?
2. What verbal and non-verbal symbols accompany communicative interactions?
3. Does communication reflect negotiated meaning or dominance by powerful actors?

These questions guided the identification of performative and participatory mechanisms shaping collective understanding and decision-making.

Results and Findings

It resulted from this study that the tree of palaver symbolizes the epicenter of African communal dialogue. It represents not only a physical space but also a social and symbolic construct where meanings are shared, contested, and renewed. Hermeneutically, Gadamer (1989) reminds us that “to interpret means precisely to bring one’s own perceptions into play so that the text is made to speak for us... to acquire a horizon of interpretation requires a fusion of horizons” (p. 39). Similarly, symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934;

Weber, 1922) posits that individuals interpret the world through symbols shaped by interaction and cultural meaning.

Under the tree of palaver, communication is performed through both verbal and nonverbal symbols that reveal deep layers of community values and social relations. These performative acts are translated in inclusivity, circular seating, social roles, shared meaning, and consensus that constitute the participatory communicative mechanisms that sustain African communal life.

Inclusivity: A Call for All

Inclusivity marks the beginning of every palaver. Women, youth, and visitors are invited to join, reflecting Habermas's (1989) notion of the public sphere as an open realm accessible to all. Freire (1983) similarly upholds that every person possesses the right "to individually and collectively speak their word" (p. 76). Bessette's participatory framework affirms that openness and equal access to dialogue are foundational for community empowerment.

In this sense, speech under the tree is not a privilege but a communal responsibility. Malamba (1993) affirms that "speech is considered as the ancestors' gift and everybody in the community must deserve it" (p. 163). The palaver tree thus becomes more than a meeting place; it is a locus of dialogical democracy, where speaking and listening are moral acts tied to the life of the community.

The Circle Sitting Arrangement: Equality and Connection

The circular seating arrangement embodies the symbolic geometry of equality. It visually disrupts hierarchy and signifies continuity, reflecting a collective worldview where all are equally situated within the circle of life. Mr. Jacky, a participant, remarked that "the circle sitting arrangement resonates acceptance... it reflects implicitly that community members are equal and connected, engaged toward shared goals."

This form mirrors Arendt's (1958) concept of the public sphere as a "common world that gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other." In African cosmology, circularity connotes unity and the unbroken chain of community. The circle arrangement therefore transforms communication from hierarchical exchange into participatory encounter—an act of mutual recognition and interdependence.

Social Roles: Hierarchy within Harmony

Despite its egalitarian symbolism, the palaver tree reflects social hierarchy. Chiefs and elders occupy privileged roles, legitimized by tradition. This organization upholds cultural order and respect but simultaneously reinforces gender exclusion. Women's voices, though vital, often remain constrained by patriarchal norms.

This tension reveals a productive clash between egalitarian participation and traditional hierarchy. While hierarchy ensures authority and continuity, it also restricts inclusive deliberation. The palaver tree thus becomes a site where African societies negotiate modern democratic ideals through indigenous structures of respect and leadership.

Shared and Negotiated Meaning: Communicative Rationality

Meaning under the tree of palaver is not fixed but co-created. Participants continually negotiate interpretations to achieve shared understanding. This aligns with Habermas's (1984) notion of communicative action, wherein actors engage in rational discourse free from coercion.

This dynamic reframes communication as relationship-building rather than mere message transmission. The goal is not persuasion but intersubjective consensus—the heart of African deliberative communication.

Consensus and Social Cohesion

Consensus is the culminating act of communication under the tree of palaver. It sustains moral order and social cohesion through open deliberation and mutual agreement. Habermas (1987) explains that communicative action renews cultural knowledge and coordinates social integration.

In this sense, consensus is not conformity but a lived expression of solidarity—the moral cement that binds the community together.

Discussion

Discussion: Palaver tree coalesces and clashes with Habermas ‘Public Sphere

Under the tree of palaver, communication becomes a performative act that constructs community. Listening, turn-taking, and metaphorical storytelling embody participatory values, transforming speech into social action. These acts coalesce multiple communication models: linear message clarity, interactive feedback, and transactional simultaneity.

Power asymmetries between elders and youth, men and women, or traditional and modern voices often disrupt ideal participation. Yet, rather than dissolving the communal bond, these tensions generate productive dialogical friction, strengthening participatory resilience.

The palaver tree thus operates as a symbolic and participatory communication system, mediating between tradition and transformation, authority and dialogue, unity and dissent.

Publicness and Deliberation: The Tree of Palaver

Formal gatherings under the Tree of Palaver begin with an open call inviting all members of the community to participate, an expression of inclusivity. Habermas (1989) similarly asserts that events are “public” when they are open to all rather than restricted to a few. His notion of the public sphere describes a “realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed,” accessible to all citizens. This openness, grounded in the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, enables debate on matters of general concern, free from economic and political coercion.

Here lies an illuminating convergence and clash: both the Tree of Palaver and the Habermasian public sphere emphasize dialogue, consensus, and rational debate; yet, their epistemological bases diverge. Habermas’s framework rests on rational-critical discourse in modernity, while the Tree of Palaver operates on relational and symbolic rationalities rooted in spirituality and tradition. The African space privileges communitarian harmony over individual critique—making consensus not only a discursive goal but a sacred duty.

Gender, Power, and Voice

Despite its inclusivity, the Tree of Palaver reflects traditional social hierarchies. Women’s participation, while significant, is often constrained by cultural norms. As respondent Kiniaki observes, “Women may attend the palaver, but they may not speak publicly. They may whisper in men’s ears... This whispering regulates the debates, guides them, and feeds into decisions taken at the end.” This nuanced participation illustrates that silence and whispering are not markers of subordination but forms of subtle power and influence. This contrasts with Habermas’s ideal of open participation, yet aligns with African ethics of role complementarity and respect.

Similarly, the chief and his councilors occupy the highest communicative authority. Tshika remarks, “Social roles are already defined. We know who is who and who does what.” The defined hierarchy prevents confusion and ensures respect for cultural norms. This structured order, though seemingly non-egalitarian, sustains community harmony through role consciousness rather than coercive control.

Communicative Rationality and the Humanized Process

The empowerment of community members under the tree fosters autonomy and self-determination. Participation enables individuals to express themselves responsibly and act with agency. As Adeline explains, “The tree of palaver gives shade when needed during the hot season. It helps express ourselves without coercion. It is a second home.” This humanized process resonates with Habermas’s concept of communicative action, where understanding and consensus are pursued through rational dialogue. For Habermas (1984), communicative action is possible because rationality is inherent within language particularly through argumentation. Argumentation, he writes, is the form of speech where “participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through argumentation.”

Both systems Habermas’s rational-critical discourse and the African palaver rest on mutual understanding and non-coercive communication. However, their clash lies in orientation: Habermas’s model privileges universal reason, while the Tree of Palaver integrates spirituality, communal emotion, and ancestral guidance into its deliberative process. Thus, African communicative rationality is relationally reasoned rather than purely logical.

Challenges of Participatory Communication under the Tree of Palaver

Despite its dialogical virtues, the palaver tree model faces enduring challenges. Gender and age-based hierarchies often limit inclusivity. Women, though present, are frequently silenced in public deliberation. As respondent Kiniaki observed, “women may attend the palaver, but they are not allowed to speak. They can only whisper in the men’s ears.”

Van de Fliert’s (2007) typology of participation clarifies this limitation: many palaver interactions remain within passive or consultative participation, where decisions are guided by male elders. Genuine participatory communication, by contrast, requires interactive participation, shared control, co-decision, and joint ownership of development outcomes.

While patriarchal constraints persist, the palaver tree continues to function as a vibrant model of community dialogue. As Christensen and Jonsson (2011) emphasize, participation should be understood as direct involvement in creative and problem-solving processes. From this view, the tree of palaver remains an indigenous expression of participatory communication, a living forum that harmonizes dialogue, consensus, and collective agency.

Conclusion

Community is fundamentally defined by shared goals expressed through communication systems that its members design, sustain, and endorse. Within the African context, the tree of palaver stands as a communication system par excellence, a locus of gathering where social life, moral order, and collective meaning converge. This study examined how communicative acts performed under the tree of palaver can be harnessed to advance participatory communication.

Contrary to the diffusion model of communication, which emphasizes one-way transmission of information, the participatory communication model underscores dialogue, interaction, and collaboration at all levels of decision-making. Through this analytical lens, the study deciphered performative communicative acts under the tree of palaver and demonstrated that these acts, when interpreted symbolically, can foster inclusive and dialogical participation.

Findings suggest that the tree of palaver embodies a constellation of symbolic mechanisms, inclusivity (the open call for participation), the circular sitting arrangement, defined social roles, shared and negotiated meanings, and consensus-building that collectively empower community members and

enhance deliberative engagement. These mechanisms exemplify how traditional African communication practices can inspire participatory approaches in modern development communication.

Nevertheless, the study identified persistent challenges that temper these participatory ideals. Gender and age-based discrimination remain visible, as women and youth are often constrained to peripheral or silent roles within the deliberative process. This aligns with Van de Fliert's (2007) concept of passive participation, where involvement exists without shared control or decision-making authority.

Despite these limitations, the tree of palaver continues to serve as a vital template for participatory communication and community empowerment. It remains a living symbol of African dialogical democracy an indigenous forum where speech, respect, and consensus sustain social harmony. However, the journey toward fully realized participatory communication is ongoing and demands further empirical exploration to address power imbalances and deepen inclusivity. Future research should therefore interrogate how the symbolic mechanisms of the tree of palaver can be adapted, transformed, and institutionalized within contemporary participatory development frameworks.

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