



Review Article

Paradigms of Interaction: A Comparative Approach between Western and African Communication through the Metaphysical Lens.

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the fundamental divergences between Western communication, rooted in the pragmatics of the Palo Alto School, and African communication, as theorized by Professor Jacques Fame Ndongo. While the Western model is structured around the immediacy of feedback and the horizontality of interpersonal exchange ("one cannot not communicate"), the African paradigm unfolds within a holistic and ontological dimension. The "hidden dimension" of African exchange integrates metaphysical actors (ancestors, spiritual entities) who relativize the notion of immediate feedback in favor of cosmic harmony. Through a socio-semiotic approach, this research demonstrates that communication in Africa is not merely a transfer of information but a ritualistic dynamic aimed at maintaining the balance between the visible and invisible worlds.

Keywords: *African communication, Metaphysical feedback, Socio-semiotics, Cosmic harmony, Rituals*

INTRODUCTION

The perspective taken on this theme is inspired by the difficult or painful affirmation of African communication as a discipline that has developed its scientific concepts and theories. As a result, researchers in the field of information and communication sciences hesitate to integrate it as a true heuristic field. However, MODO ASSE (2022) emphasizes that African communication is both a concept and a set of teachings introduced over a decade ago at the Advanced School of Mass Communication (ESSTIC) at the University of Yaoundé II, by Jacques FAME NDONGO, former director of this institution, and currently Minister of Higher Education of Cameroon.

Discussing African communication as a discipline is still a subject of controversy. Some have quickly, in a risky or hasty manner, thought that there would only be communication, plain and simple. Upon observation, the specificity of "African communication" that emerges from daily life constitutes its "hidden dimension," that of the codes, rites, representations, and stereotypes unique to it. Yves WINKIN (1996) postulates that the challenge of an Anthropology of communication is precisely to learn to see communication in the words, gestures, and gazes of daily life. Consequently, from the cultural lens through which communication acts are observed, the general framework of "African communication" takes the researcher off the beaten

path and allows them to study the multiple facets of a specifically African communication. This consists of not limiting oneself to explicit messages, but encompassing all behaviors in interactive situations. This is the reason why this work is interested in a comparative approach between Western communication and African communication.

1. Context and Justification of the Theme

Research in Information and Communication Sciences (ICS) has long unfolded through epistemological models born in the West, primarily structured around linearity (Shannon and Weaver) or systemic circularity (Palo Alto School). While these models have allowed for the theorization of human interaction from the angle of pragmatics, they struggle to account for the complexity of exchanges in African societies. Indeed, the African intellectual here comes up against what Valentin-Yves MUDIMBE calls the "smell of the Father": this persistent, even suffocating presence of Western frameworks of thought that impose their own "library" as the only universal referential. The justification for this scientific contribution lies in the necessity to extract oneself from this gnosis of heuristic thought to operate a true "decolonization" of communication research. It is a matter of no longer perceiving Africa as a mere application field for Palo Alto's theories, but as the site of production of an autonomous paradigm. Driven by Jacques FAME NDONGO's socio-semiotics, the aim is to

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explore a communication that frees itself from the epistemological "Father" to take root in a "hidden dimension" made of rites and metaphysical forces. Understanding the persistence of these patterns in the digital age is not a nostalgic quest, but an act of rupture aimed at restoring the sovereignty of meaning in the African context.

2. Problematic: Human Interaction Facing the Sacred

The central problem of this study lies in the confrontation between two worldviews: a Western vision where feedback is an immediate and explicit validation of reception, and an African vision where interaction is porous, integrating non-human actors. Therefore, how is human interaction redefined when it is put "to the test of the metaphysical"? If, according to the Palo Alto axiom, "one cannot not communicate," what happens to this axiom when the receiver is an invisible entity (Ancestor, Spirit, Genie)? The problematic raises the idea of a relativized feedback: the response to a message is no longer necessarily verbal or instantaneous; it becomes a cosmic resonance, a natural sign, or a ritual silence. We will ask how metaphysical instances (such as the *Nkik*, the *Eséné*, and the *Akômeya* among the Fang) transform the act of communication into a device for maintaining universal harmony rather than a simple tool for social management. In its acts, African communication also involves intermediation where meaning is not the product of a one-on-one encounter, but the outcome of a negotiation with third-party instances that structure the group's ontology.

3. Objectives and Methodology

- **Theoretical Objectives:** This work aims to establish a clear epistemological distinction between Western pragmatic communication and African ontological communication.
- **Analytical Objectives:** The study aims to demonstrate, through the example of Fang culture, how metaphysical entities intervene and act as active and regulating participants in the communication loop.
- **Prospective Objectives:** It seeks to evaluate the capacity for resistance and adaptation of these traditional models in the face of the immediacy imposed by contemporary digital tools.
- **Methodology:** A qualitative and comparative approach is adopted. The

research relies on documentary and critical analysis, proposing a confrontation of the foundational texts of the Palo Alto School with the socio-semiotic work of Jacques FAME NDONGO and MUDIMBE, among others. It also relies on an ethno-semiotic approach, analyzing ritual codes and symbolic languages to decipher the "hidden dimension" of exchanges in the Fang context. Finally, the research establishes an anchor in phenomenological deduction, allowing an observation of communicational behaviors that illustrate the relativization of feedback against the imperatives of the sacred.

4. Theoretical Framework: Between Interactional Pragmatics and the Ontology of the Invisible

The theoretical framework rests on a comparative and transdisciplinary approach. It mobilizes three conceptual pillars to analyze the transition from communication as a "tool" to communication as a "maintenance ritual".

- **The Pragmatics of the Palo Alto School (The paradigm of circularity):** Based on theories by Watzlawick, Bateson, and Hall, it posits the impossibility of not communicating (every behavior is a message). It introduces the feedback loop as a circular system where sender and receiver mutually influence each other in real time. It also includes proxemics (Edward T. Hall's "hidden dimension"), but remains primarily anthropocentric and physical.
- **Endogenization (Toward a semiotics of the African public space):** Mobilizing Jacques FAME NDONGO's thought, communication must fit into local cultural codes to be performative (sociological efficacy). The African public space is a field of forces where the word holds symbolic and social power, not just a place for rational debate.
- **The Anthropology of Communication (The holistic and metaphysical dimension):** Communication is a "ritual of communion". It involves ontological participation, integrating a "third invisible" party (ancestors, forces of nature). It operates on a long, cosmogonic temporality, unlike Palo Alto's focus on

immediacy. Feedback is sacrificial, ritual, and harmonic.

Table 1: The table below summarizes the conceptual opposition that structures our analysis:

Key Concepts	Palo Alto Model (West)	Model of African Communication Thought
Purpose	Efficacy of transmission / Relationship	Cosmic harmony / Social equilibrium
Actors	Physical individuals	Extended community (Humans + Ancestors + Spirits)
Feedback	Immediate, verbal or non-verbal	Deferred, ritual, metaphysical
Space	Geometric and interpersonal	Sacred and multidimensional
Nature of the Word	Information / Negotiation tool	Vital force / Creative power

This framework allows us to analyze how silence or detours (perceived as noise or failure in Palo Alto) are strategies for respecting the ontological hierarchy in the African communication model.

I. THE WESTERN PARADIGM: INTERACTION AS A PRAGMATIC SYSTEM

The modern understanding of communication in the West requires a return to the roots of cybernetics and systemics.

1.1. The contribution of the Palo Alto School: In the mid-20th century, the Palo Alto School (Bateson, Watzlawick) transformed the "communication" object by breaking with the linear transmission model (sender-channel-receiver) to postulate communication as a circular, global system. Their fundamental axiom is "one cannot not communicate". Every human behavior acquires message value. Man is an acting unit within a social system where each element influences the other in real time.

1.2. The feedback loop: The originality of the Western approach lies in the institutionalization of the feedback loop. Borrowed from mechanics and computer science, it ensures system regulation, allowing actors to mutually adjust: the sender modifies their message based on the receiver's reactions. Interaction aims for immediate efficacy. This loop is horizontally and interpersonally focused, assuming actors are present and on the same material plane of existence.

1.3. The limits of the cybernetic model: Despite its relevance, the Palo Alto model suffers from a form

of metaphysical myopia. It is anthropocentric, assuming only humans (or their tech) emit/receive meaning. Interaction is locked in the "tyranny of the visible" and the instantaneous. Silence is treated as a gap, not a resonance space with an invisible alterity. By focusing on pragmatics, the West evacuated the ontological dimension of speech, ignoring that in other geocultural spaces, the feedback loop can stretch toward entities beyond empirical observation.

II. AFRICAN COMMUNICATION: A SOCIO-SEMIOTICS OF THE LIVING AND THE INVISIBLE

African communication does not define itself as a simple transmission technique, but as a relational ontology.

2.1. For a decolonized communication science: Jacques FAME NDONGO proposes an approach accounting for African specificities, moving toward a paradigm aimed at an epistemological rupture. He views communication in Africa as a "permanent dynamic of maintaining balance". It connects worlds, not just individuals. African socio-semiotics observes the deep meaning hidden behind the ritual sign.

2.2. The "Hidden Dimension": FAME NDONGO highlights a specifically African "hidden dimension". It is not just physical space, but symbolic space, consisting of:

- **Rites:** Protocol channels that secure the exchange.

- **Codes and Stereotypes:** Cultural filters identifying belonging and initiation levels.
- **Representations:** The image the African has of their ancestor/totem influences their expression. The explicit message is just the tip of the iceberg; the essence circulates in the unspoken and respect for invisible hierarchies.

2.3. The relativization of feedback: Here lies the clearest distinction from Western theory. In the African paradigm, feedback is relativized. The communication accepts, and even demands, a metaphysical latency period. Feedback is relativized due to:

- **The authority of the Absent:** The final receiver may be an ancestor, whose response comes via events (a fruitful harvest, conception, or conversely, a calamity).
- **The Silence of Validation:** Silence is an incubation period to let spiritual powers "weigh" the spoken word.
- **Resonance over Response:** Feedback is harmony restored; if a palaver reconciles families, social peace acts as the feedback loop.

The invisible world also sends perceptible messages (e.g., a butterfly signaling an important stranger's arrival). Among the Minyanka of Mali, the *gbunfolo* is the oldest member who "speaks to the ancestors" and performs sacrifices to maintain communication. Among the Fang, communication with ancestors occurs via the *Bwiti*, an initiatory tradition. The ancestor is an active intercessor. Feedback is read in the sudden clarity of a blocked situation, unexplained healing, or a premonitory dream. Feedback thus escapes the tyranny of linearity to align with cosmic harmony.

III. CASE STUDY: METAPHYSICAL INSTANCES IN FANG COMMUNICATION

This section addresses three metaphysical entities among the Fang: *Nkùk*, *Eséné*, and *Akômeya*. René Joly ASSAKO ASSAKO (2025) argues against the intellectual "auto-emasculation" of purely relying on outdated Western theories for African realities, urging for indigenous theorization.

3.1. The *Nkùk* (Personal/Family Totem): A physical entity transmitted within a family endowed with ancestral powers of protection, capable of acting for

good or evil based on the holder's command. It can transform into a living being/spirit to communicate with its master through secret rituals. It must be fed (e.g., blood sacrifices); if not properly maintained, it can turn against the owner's offspring. When the *Nkùk* reacts, it is considered the Ancestors speaking, and the feedback comes from an indisputable metaphysical authority.

3.2. The *Eséné* (Clan totem as social regulator): It embodies the collective spirit, memory, and authority of the extended lineage. It is often an immortal animal entity guarded by a clan member. It acts as a metaphysical supervisor during external communications. Words threatening clan unity provoke the *Eséné's* "anger," manifested physically through noises, accidents, or illnesses. For example, the *Esambé* clan has a totem called *Bikiri*, a man transformed into a chimpanzee, whose presence or cries foretell the death of an elder.

3.3. The *Akômeya* (Living talisman and generational prosperity): An abstract, living, invisible entity fabricated by ancestral power to ensure a family's social ascent and prosperity. In communication, it provides the individual's speech with the "aura" or metaphysical charisma needed to convince and socially dominate. Feedback is measured by social success; wealth or authority is a positive feedback sign that the *Akômeya* is active.

Synthesis: Fang communication reveals a structure in "onion layers":

- The *Nkùk* validates sincerity.
- The *Eséné* validates social conformity.
- The *Akômeya* validates efficacy and prosperity. Feedback is not mere human agreement, but an alignment among these three living, invisible forces.

IV. SYNTHESIS AND PERSPECTIVES: AFRICAN COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The transition to digital is a complex hybridization where African anthropological structures reapropriate modern tools.

4.1. Comparative Table: African Ontology vs. Western Pragmatics:

To conclude this analysis, it is useful to synthetically compare the two paradigms studied in order to

highlight the singularity of the model defended by Jacques Fame Ndongo

Table 2: Comparative Table: African Ontology vs. Western Pragmatics:

Dimensions	Western Paradigm (Palo Alto)	African Paradigm (Fame Ndongo)
Purpose of exchange	Efficacy, influence, and info transfer.	Equilibrium, harmony, and cosmic cohesion.
Speaker status	Autonomous and rational individual.	Link in a lineage (Nkùk, Eséné, Akômeya).
Nature of Feedback	Immediate, verbal or behavioral.	Relativized, deferred, symbolic or metaphysical.
Role of Silence	Noise, failure or interactional unease.	Resonance space and respect for the sacred.
Space-Time	Linear, segmented and immediate.	Circular, mythical and transdimensional.

4.2. "Cyber-socio-semiotics": The Persistence of Ritual Online

The digital age has not erased the "hidden dimension".

- **Digital as a new Nkùk:** Family WhatsApp groups recreate individual totem solidarity, with speech filtered by respect for elders.
- **Digitization of the Eséné:** The clan totem now manages the clan's image online, where negative feedback translates to digital "social death" (boycott/excommunication).
- **Akômeya and viral success:** Online prosperity (influence, digital wealth) is perceived as the modern manifestation of the *Akômeya* dominating the global information flow.

4.3. Cosmic Harmony as the Ultimate Goal

African communication offers a valuable alternative to the "disembodied" Western model, reminding us that every exchange engages an ontological responsibility. The challenge is to maintain cosmic harmony despite the speed of the click. The finality of the exchange remains preserving Man's balance between the tangible world and the spirit world.

CONCLUSION:

Communication is a profound cultural and ontological construction. The Palo Alto School brilliantly theorized interaction as a social and pragmatic mechanic, allowing an understanding of exchanges in a society centered on the individual and technicality. Conversely, African research, driven by Jacques Fame Ndongo's socio-semiotics, revealed a "hidden dimension" where the exchange opens to a holistic universe.

In the Fang context, the *Nkùk*, *Eséné*, and *Akômeya* are not relics, but regulating agents transforming the feedback loop into a cosmic resonance. Feedback is relativized: it is the sign of a restored harmony between the visible and invisible. African communication is an existential posture aimed at preserving the balance of Man within his lineage and cosmos. This specificity adapts to the digital era, giving rise to a cyber-socio-semiotics where the ritual and the bit coexist. Stepping away from Western theoretical paths restores the sacred function of the spoken word. The future challenge of ICS in Africa is to build a science that celebrates the continuity of life across all material and spiritual dimensions.

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