

MOBILE PHONE: A TOOL FOR MODERN FISHERMEN IN GHANA

By Mawutodzi K. Abissath

It is prudent to be guided by some of the thought-provoking African proverbs like this simple one: “A child who has never travelled before tends to think that only his mother knows how to cook delicious soup.”

Long, long ago; and long before the Pyramids of Egypt were built and before Amenhotep IV a.k.a Akhenaton who was the first human being to proclaim monotheism or the concept of One God, passed through transition in 1350 B.C., traditional fishermen went to sea with only two basic tools – a wooden canoe and fishing net.

The canoe fishermen then could not sail into relatively deep sea to catch whatever fishes they wanted. They were compelled to spend long days and harsh nights at sea, all in vain like Apostle Peter and his colleagues before they met the Saviour, Jesus the Christ.

Later in the 20th century or so, when automobile was invented and mechanical engineering advanced to a cert degree of perfection, canoe fishermen added one more tool to their implements – the out-board motor. This tool helped tremendously to make sailing swift, fast and very smooth indeed. In fact, fishing became more pleasant and enjoyable. The canoes were propelled by four- stroke engines and fishermen could go as far as they wanted provided there was enough pre-mixed fuel in their petrol tank. The proud fishermen could ride and dive deep into the sea and chase fishes and harvest them in their very “dormitories” even when they are in the process of “procreating”.

In Ghana, during bumper harvest seasons, some fishermen had no choice but to dump some of their catches back into the sea to avoid selling them at heart-broken prices at the shore. Why? Because they did not have access to cold store facilities to preserve the extra catches for tomorrow. Further more; they did not have the means to communicate with their agents or customers beyond their immediate communities in advance to determine whether their catches could be sold at competitive prices before else where. Thus, they were at the mercy of some unscrupulous middle women fishmongers.

Today, at the threshold of the 21st century, thanks to Information Communication Technology (ICT) particularly Mobile Telephony, fishermen in Ghana have added the fourth most important tool to their fishing equipment – Mobile Phone. Ghanaian fishermen may be characterized as the latest segment of the Ghanaian society, especially in the rural community to join the technological train wagon of mobile phone users.

On Wednesday November 23, 2005, this writer was invited in his capacity as a Journalist interested in ICT or online-journalism or cyber-journalism to join a group of researchers, headed by the Coordinator of the Technology Assessment Project (TAP) of the University of Ghana, Legon, Dr Amos Anyimadu on a study tour of some selected Districts in the Central Region of Ghana with particular focus on fisher folks of Moree. Without attempting to bamboozle the reader with any ICT jargons such as “VSAT Technology”, “Telematics”, “Mobile telephony”, “Seamless Integration” and what have

you, suffice to say that the purpose of the study tour was simply to find out how Information Communication Technology for Advanced Development (ICT4D) policy of the Government of Ghana was being impacted on the rural communities in general. In this particular case the research was further narrowed down on how the fishermen of Moree are making use of Mobile Phones to enhance their traditional fishing business to improve upon their living standards.

Moree is a prominent fishing town along the coast of Ghana. It is about two hours' drive west of Accra, off Accra-Takoradi road a few kilometers away from Cape Coast Township. It is located in the Abura, Asebu, Kwankese District. Moree now has a population of about 30,000 according to the 2000 population census.

Even before the research team got to Moree, the team leader, Dr Anyimadu, decided that a stop-over be made at Apam, another progressive fishing town in the Central Region to briefly interact with some fishermen there to see whether the Mobile phone fiver in Ghana has caught up with them, too.

In fact, we reached Apam rather late about 7.30p.m to 8.00p.m. We asked and were directed to the real area where typical fishermen and women live. The first question Dr Anyimadu asked in the language of the people (Fanti) was whether there was any Communication Centre in the area. A wooden kiosk was pointed out to us. Even though there was no electric light in it, it was operating as a Communication Centre alright. The research team, arriving at Moree

Central Region fishermen were found to be very open and eager to offer information. As soon as they were made to understand the purpose of our visit in their community at that time of the day, the news spread like bush fires. They were told that we were a team of researchers from the University of Ghana trying to find out whether they had access to mobile phones. If yes, was there any way the communication gadgets were helping them to advance the business.

Within a twinkle of an eye, we were invaded by people and any questions put to them were responded to with alacrity. They even offered some information that we did not anticipate. They talked about how they use the mobile phones to check from their agents and customers from various parts of the country where the prices of fish were more competitive. One revelation we did not know until then was that some fishermen go to sea only to buy fishes from other bigger fishing boats to come and sell. In a nutshell the Apam fishermen are making good use of the Communication Centres and "Space to Space operators" who are operating both fixed lines and mobile phones to enhance their fishing business. Shall I digress a bit?

About 18 years ago, precisely in September 1988, just after 12 months of the establishment of an Apam Community FM Station, I personally went to spend seven days in that town to administer survey questionnaires to a variety of respondents. The survey was in connection with my Project Work in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

award of Diploma in Journalism of the Ghana Institute of Journalism, Accra. My topic was “Communication and Organisation of Rural People for Development: A Case Study of Apam FM Station”. In fact the survey covered Apam and Mannford fishing communities. Even though the Station had been in existence for barely one year at the time, I wanted to know if it was making any impact on the rural people. As a matter of fact, the Apam Community FM Station was an experimental Project of the Ghana Broad Casting Corporation (GBC). The experiment was based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) concept of Rural Broadcasting.

What was fascinating about the Apam FM Station was that, at that time, Ghana was the second country in Africa (after Kenya), selected by UNESCO to benefit from the Community FM Station Programme initiated by what was known as the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). The Station was commissioned on September 26,1987 by the then Ag. PNDC Secretary for Information, Mr. Kwamena Ahwoi on behalf of the then Chairman J.J. Rawlings.

One major benefit that the fishermen derived from that Community FM Station, according to the survey was that, every dawn before they embarked on their fishing expeditions, they would wait and listen to the weather forecast for the day on the radio in their own language before they went to sea. That service the Station was rendering them was more valuable to them than anything else in their vocation or trade. It helped them avoid storms and other unpredictable hazards at sea. Thus, besides, relevant information, education, entertainment and other motivational programmes that the station was broadcasting to mobilize the rural folks for development as far as communication was concerned, the people were allowed to go to the studio to undertake some unique traditional performances themselves.

Today the Apam Community FM Station is “dead”. The fishermen lamented when I inquired on Wednesday 23 November, 2005 when the Technology Assessment Project team visited the town. Apam fishermen expressed the desire to have their Community FM Station back. According to them, the 10kw transmitter donated by UNESCO has broken down and the Station had been off air for the past seven years or so. Now they had to rely on Adom FM in Tema or Peace F M in Accra to listen to the weather forecast.

May I take the liberty to suggest that the District Assembly responsible for Apam, the Member of Parliament for that constituency in collaboration with GBC, if possible, should do some feasibility study of the Community FM Station and come up with a proposal for the consideration of UNESCO for technical support to see if that Radio Station could not be revived for the development communication of the rural people?

On Thursday November 24, 2005, the Technology Assessment Project study team continued with their research findings at Moree. There is one Communication Centre in Moree, called “Shalom Communication Centre”. It has one fixed line. The land line telephone number is virtually known to everybody in the town. With this strategy whoever in the town receives a call from any part of the country through the

Communication Centre can be sent for to respond for a fee. The Communication Centre owner also has a mobile phone in addition to his fixed line. In addition to the Shalom Communication Centre, there are two others in the town. There are four other people who are operating “Table-top Space to Space system” in the town. Those who have mobile phones have to search for a suitable location to position themselves in order to receive network connectivity otherwise, their handsets will only be “museum pieces” in their hands. Mobile phone operating companies should not only crowd themselves in Accra and other big cities. They must consider investing in rural communities, too. They will still make profit considering what we saw at Moree.

In an interview with the chief fisher of Moree, Nana Fin and some of his elders, the Mobile phone has become one of the most important tools they are now using to enhance their business as far as the fishery industry is concerned. According to Chief fisherman, he himself has two mobile phones. He himself does no longer go to sea often. Therefore, when his people are sailing, he gives one mobile phone to them to take along. He keeps one with himself at home. With this strategy communication link is established between him and his fishermen at sea.

He explains that whenever there is any problem such as a shortage of pre-mixed fuel or someone falls sick at sea the fishermen at sea use the mobile phone to communicate with him at home. Then he will quickly respond and arrange for solution to whatever might be the difficulty being encountered at sea. Nana Fin is very happy and proud for this dimension brought about in their vocation thanks to Mobile Telephony. He recalls that previously, when his fishermen went to sea for about three or more days without any feedback, he would be restless until they returned safely. “But these days I am always in contact with my people at sea if only they are within 30km to 40km radius away from me. And able to know whatever is happening until they come back to shore”, he said with broad smiles in his face.

Furthermore, with the Mobile phone he could verify the prices of fish at various mark places at Tema, Kumasi, Koforidua or even Accra before his people land with their catches. Other fishermen spoken to in Moree concurred with the Chief Fisherman. Messrs Kobina Otu, Mark Pratt and Kofi Sarsah, all of whom have one mobile phone each were very proud to possess the modern communication gadget which is making their business more enjoyable. They are calling on mobile operators to come and open mobile phone shops in Moree because more people are eager to acquire the equipment as part of their fishing implements.

Nevertheless, the fisher folks of Moree have one particular problem which is militating against the smooth operation of the canoe fishing industry in the are. According to fishermen interviewed the basic problem is the use of very powerful lights by some fishing trawlers or boats in fishing in their waters. They said this problem has been persisting for over two years now and all efforts made to obtain the attention of authorities concerned to help solve the problem prove futile. They complained bitterly that the use of the powerful lights tends to drive the fishes away from canoe fishermen who are not able to do deep sea fishing. In fact the Chief fisherman of Moree stated that

because of this problem the business of women fishmongers in the town has virtually come to an end. “Now our women are leaving for Abidjan, Kumasi and other places because they don’t have work to do in our town” he lamented.

Mr. Kobina Otu, another leading fisherman, put his lamentation in a rather philosophical fashion thus: “Look us,” he chipped in. “We don’t have forest into which we can go and hunt for games or cultivate cash crops like cocoa and so on. Fishing is the only vocation we depend on to feed ourselves, cloth our wives, and above all to education our children. If today others are making it impossible for us to undertake our God-given career, then what are we living for?”, he queried hypothetically. Moree fishermen are therefore, appealing to the authorities concerned to come to their aid by stopping those who are using the powerful lights in fishing in their area of operation.

The Technology Assessment Project has been mandated by the Ghana Office of the World Bank and other partners to undertake a radio production on Information and Decentralized Development. A follow-up forum on Mobile Communication will take place at Busy Internet in Accra on December 5, 2005, while in-depth research findings of the Moree study tour will be published in a book later. Ghana now has no choice but to embrace ICT to accelerate its development strategy for the prosperity of the nation.

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