AIDS communication through Billboards and Murals in Tanzanian

Aldin K. Mutembei
Senior lecturer, Department of Kiswahili Literature, Communication and Publishing
Institute of Kiswahili Studies
University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
mutembei@yahoo.com

Abstract

One of the incontrovertible marks for Tanzania's open door policy is the huge billboards along major roads and highways; and murals (or graffiti) on fences or walls of large buildings. This is relatively a new way of communication in a country that once pursued Ujamaa policies. Promoters of public health and particularly HIV/AIDS awareness campaign have turned to use billboards as one of the ways to communicate responsiveness messages to different communities. Artists similarly, have created a space for their murals to share their messages about the AIDS scourge.

As this kind of communication uses artistic language and creativity, it attracts a curious literary critic into rethinking the meaning and boundaries of literature and its role in society. The paper attempts to examine what kind of HIV/AIDS messages is being communicated. What impact does such communication has to people, and how in turn the people respond to such adverts?

Using a modified Awareness, Attitude and Behaviour Model (AAB model) adapted from the Earle and Phillips report on billboard survey (2002), the paper seeks to understand the feelings, perception, attitudes and behaviour of individuals as they respond to the adverts on erected billboards or murals and how individuals connect to the figurative language that those billboards and murals beam out.

Key words: mobile literature, communication, billboards, murals, AIDS, Kiswahili sayings

AIDS communication through Billboards and the responses it arouses among Tanzanians

INTRODUCTION

In almost all towns and cities; along main roads and highways in Tanzania one finds several advertisements, announcements, and warnings on the billboards. On the walls along some junction roads, there are murals and posters most of which are pictorial. The billboards and murals, which are mushrooming in cities, are a new phenomenon in Tanzania. The AIDS campaign in Tanzania joins this new way for communicating its messages.

Together with pictographic messages, there are several Kiswahili sayings and concepts, which have been created in an effort to address and control the AIDS crisis since its manifestation in Tanzania nearly thirty years to date. The sayings and phrases were and still are beamed to the community in an endeavour to bring light to the darkness side of AIDS. They are part of the campaign through information, education and communication (IEC), to control the spread of HIV by educating people, raising their awareness, and helping them to cope with the deadly disease and its demoralizing socio-economic characteristics. The words and sayings are aspects of Kiswahili literature because their language is artistically constructed to draw attention while sending the message across. This notwithstanding, some of these messages are ambiguous and contradict each other. Few others stand in a sharp opposition to the society's changing norms and culture that are advocated by several education institutions and some NGO's. Two scenarios that challenge each other have provoked us to critically look into the words, sayings and phrases that accompany different kinds of images put on the Billboards and Murals as part of the campaign against AIDS in Tanzania. Of recent, the same messages have been heard from various radio and TV stations.

The first scenario is from radio and TV debates. Recently, the Tanzanian Media Women Association (TAMWA) started a campaign against words and labels that could stigmatize people with HIV or AIDS. Specifically TAMWA was against phrases like "*Beware AIDS kills*". On the billboards and murals this phrase was translated in such illustrations that show a person with AIDS facing an endless parade of graves. To associations like TAMWA, these kinds of phrase and illustrations bring negative images not only to the people with AIDS, but also their significant others and the entire society. We will come back to this phrase: "*AIDS kills*" later in our discussion, but at this juncture it suffices to point out that besides stigmatizing a person with AIDS, such pictorial phrases could undermine the campaign that has shown a granule of success so far, in the effort to control the spread of HIV.

The second illustration is a picture on a billboard: a man resting on a swinging piece of "cloth". This “cloth” where the man is resting is tied both ends to two posts of coconut trees. Glancing at this image, one gets an impression of an ideal relaxation along the beach. Apparently the “cloth” is nothing but a condom. This advertisement of *salama* condom, a popular trade name for condoms used in the Swahili speaking community, can be seen in several places along main roads in Dar es Salaam. We took a look at the one located along Morogoro road close to the Jangwani grounds; the grounds that are popular for Christian meetings and crusades. But what was interesting is the interpretation that people gave to such illustrations.

The use of billboards or murals in the fight against AIDS has been acknowledged elsewhere. In 2002, in Georgia -US, for example children in elementary schools were asked to draw pictures relating to HIV and AIDS. The winners got their drawings transformed into a billboard. One of

the winning illustration said "**A**bstinence **I**s **D**efinitely **S**mart (S. McIntyre, 2002). This billboard was communicating its message across the entire community, and most importantly the message was about AIDS as it was artistically against it.

The way the concept of AIDS surfaces in this billboard carries with it the basic element of what constitutes a literary sentence. Thus, "abstinence is definitely smart" is a kind of sayings that are considered as literature in this paper. Written in Kiswahili, such sayings fall under what we will call "Kiswahili mobile literature" seen on moving trucks, buses, pick-ups and tri-cycles in East Africa. These words are artistically created and mostly use figures of speech to communicate the intended message.

These and other phrases as we will be showing shortly, gave rise to a question asked in this paper: Are words, phrases, sayings and images used in this move bringing more positive than negative results? Focusing on the issue of stigma, we look on the implications of such messages to especially the people who are living with HIV and orphans.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

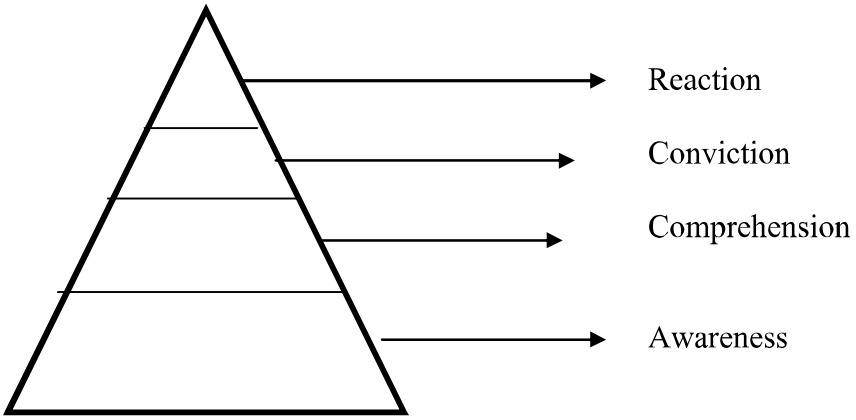
The aim of this paper is to analyze the pictorial and figurative messages that were collected from this Kiswahili mobile literature (focusing on billboards, and murals) with the intention of identifying contradicting and ambiguous communication.

Specifically the objectives of this paper are:

1. To discuss people's understanding of the message communicated to them through the mobile literatures.
2. To identify words and sayings which send negative messages

The AAB model

As adapted from the Earle and Phillips report on billboard survey (2002), the model seeks to understand the feelings, perception, attitudes and behaviour of individuals as related to, or stimulated by words and graphics on any erected billboard or murals. The Survey explains the model that "it identifies a continuum ranging from a state of ignorance of the special challenges that are created by HIV/AIDS to intimate knowledge of those challenges". In this continuum, attitude acts as a mediating variable and impacts the model through all stages. These stages are in pyramidal shape, in the sense that at the bottom of a triangle, there is awareness, followed as one ascends, by comprehension…and the more one goes up, the more the triangle decreases (see below)



Observing this model, questions that guided the discussion were as follows:

1. Mention at least one way through which AIDS messages have been communicated to people in the streets.
2. What is your understanding of those messages in relation to the campaign against the spread of HIV?
3. Having in mind the campaign to control the spread of HIV transmission, what would you say about the role of this billboard/mural?
4. Thinking of people living with HIV and their care takers, what is your reaction concerning AIDS messages on billboard and murals?

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Our approach is inclusive aiming at getting a preview of the general public's understanding of the messages on billboards and murals, and what impact do these modes of communication have to especially people living with HIV and AIDS. Using the Awareness, Attitude and Behaviour Model (*AAB model*, the Earle and Phillips Consulting Group, 2002), specifically we wanted to address the issue of stigmatization in relation to these modes of communication. Tanzania was divided into four zones: West or Lake Zone, East or Coastal zone, Northern zone and Southern Zone. The division of these zones was based on the 4 referral hospitals in Tanzania which include, Bugando for the West Zone, Muhimbili, for the East, KCMC, for the North and Mbeya for the South. It is also in these hospitals where, major campaigns against the spread of HIV are carried out and HIV test results are confirmed. In each zone, we randomly selected one or two regions and visited its main town. In each town, every billboard, mural or poster with HIV/AIDS related messages got selected. By using a digital camera, we collected twenty such messages. Using a multimedia projector, the photos of these messages were then projected to a selected population in Dar es Salaam region for data collection.

Sample composition and methodology

The collection of opinions involved two different groups: those who were in schools, and those outside schools. Initially we aimed at listening to one hundred respondents. We envisioned a group to have at least twelve people. However the actual number ended with having six people in each school and a mixture of six to seven in the out-of-school groups. Four secondary schools were selected in Dar es Salaam. Two schools out of four were for girls only (*Jangwani and Zanaki)* and the other two were for boys only *(Azania and Pugu*). Students in these schools represented the elite who were assumed to have access to other means of information on HIV/AIDS. These students were randomly selected from members of *AIDS Clubs* that are in these schools. We visited one school at a time and using a projector, the photographed artworks were projected to each of the groups in all secondary school students.

The second group was general population. Strategically we chose to visit and discuss with people gathered in the entertainment clubs where normally there are big screens used to show football matches. Four such clubs were selected in Dar es Salaam (*Rose garden, Break Point, Mango garden and River side*). We visited one club after the other and had people gathered in groups of either six or seven people. Like the collection of opinions from schools, at each club we projected the photographed images and have discussion evolve around each image projected. In total we had fifty respondents who volunteered to give their opinions based on the set of questions. At first we were asking whether the respondents had seen the billboards and murals on AIDS before. Most of the respondents had seen the projected illustrations before. After this initial layout, the discussions started and the tape recorder was used to record the conversations under the respondents' consent. It was easier to have each person make a contribution in secondary schools than it was in the clubs; however, members of each group were given equal chance to give their opinions..

Four questions were used as guidelines for discussion. The questions sought to understand aspects related to awareness, comprehension, conviction and re-action. All conversations were tape-recorded and later transcribed, before the data was entered verbatim into the computer in a word processing programme.

FINDINGS, PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The information collected from the focus group discussions was examined along with the messages on the billboards and murals using a content analysis approach. In each group the discussion started by showing two photos to the discussants: one is the billboards with its words read: *UKIMWI ni kifo* (AIDS is death). There was a drawing of graves surrounds the words on this billboard. The other is a mural that shows people holding a coffin, facing a grave yard, underneath there are words say,: Ogopa UKIMWI (*Be afraid of AIDS*). We decided to start with these two because, equating AIDS to death is very common type of "warning" in the campaign against the spread of HIV. AIDS is almost synonymous to death. The analogy is depicted everywhere: in newspapers, Radio, TV, posters, during seminars, etc. After showing these pictures to the respondents, the four questions above followed. Kiswahili language was used in the discussion, and although there were four questions, people were allowed to ask questions and give opinions related to the main question. The projected photographs created interesting discussion.

Several respondents said that the billboard with the words: "living dead," instills fear to the general community. One student said: *To people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) this billboard and murals deny them the right to have hope in life*. Among people who were in the entertainment clubs one said that the illustration encourages suicidal acts.

Of all the billboards and murals that equate AIDS to death, one caught our attention. It is the billboard located at the entrance of one of the district hospitals in Dar es Salaam, in Mwananyamala municipality, which reads:



A billboard at the entrance of Mwananyamala district hospital (Eastern Zone)

The words in Kiswahili on the billboard could be translated as: "Avoid living in fear: use prevention" – (*Epuka kuishi kwa hofu, tumia kinga).* There were more reactions on this message than any other billboard. At the secondary schools both boys and girls strongly suggested that the billboard has to be removed. They all agreed that it beams more negative impact than positive one. Several students said that the billboard degrades people living positively with the deadly virus. It considers them dead, before they had died. The phrase "*living dead*", they said was the most improper one. "By so saying…", one person in the bar said, "the billboard stigmatizes

people with HIV virus (PLHA). It is also like telling the rest of the society not to associate with the PLHA because they are dead, although they are living".

In 1994, the Paris AIDS Summit Declaration acknowledged the central role of PLHA and encouraged their greater involvement in the formulation and implementation of policies against the spread of the HIV. The issue of looking at the PLHA and insinuating that they be seen as living or dead is certainly undermining such efforts. It does not only stigmatize them but also isolate them when they are needed most in the campaign against the spread of HIV. The UNAIDS adopted the Greater Involvement of People living with HIV and AIDS (GIPA) in 1998. By labeling them as living dead, such billboards discourage the PLHA from participating in the fight to control the spread of HIV.

Despite the contradiction, the billboard brings in a new phenomenon in communicating messages in Tanzania. In a country where almost all the people speak Kiswahili, it is expected that official communication should be in that language. Indeed, the government policy on language directs that all such communication should be done in Kiswahili. Yet, this billboard mixes Kiswahili and English languages. This indicates a change in communication landscape in especially cities in Tanzania. The elites, those who can speak and read English are associated with beaming the stigmatizing messages. Those who insist on the use of Kiswahili language are seen as bringing encouragement while giving a clear warning on prevention measures. Giving warning is maintained in other billboards and murals.

Another billboard in the Eastern zone, at the entrance of Morogoro market has the words suggesting something different. It says: *Kwanini tunaendekeza kujamiiana ovyo, ogopa UKMIWI. Acha uasherati* (Why do we loosely continue having sex? be afraid of AIDS. Stop adultery). In this regard, heterosexuality as a means of HIV transmission (a question that also suggests being unfaithful), does not necessarily consider the circumstances that give rise to sexual acts. The wording in this billboard is accusatory with a blaming sense, which contradicts the accommodative policies in the campaign against the spread of HIV. Whereas unsafe sexual acts are the leading mode through which HIV is transmitted in Africa, such billboards do not communicate the economic, social and cultural factors that precipitate such transmission.

In the focus group discussion with respondents from one of the entertainment clubs in Dar es Salaam, group members said some of the billboards and murals encourage the family members and the entire community to isolate people with HIV. One said: *jamii itawatenga kwa kuwaona kuwa wao ni waasherati tu. Sasa mtoto ambaye alizaliwa na UKIMWI ni mwasherati*? (The society would isolate them and would see them as simply adulterers. Now, tell me, a child who is born positive is he/she also an adulterer?). Although most of the billboards and murals collected had negative images to PLHA, there were few that created mixed feelings and interpretations. The discussion indicated different levels of understanding the feelings, perception and attitudes of respondents regarding our AAB model.

Awareness

Almost all student respondents were aware of these billboards and murals. Few people at the riverside club said that they were not aware of the murals drawn on the walls. However, when asked, whom did they think the messages were targeting, most people in a groupknew that it was for the general public. Regarding the "*AIDS is death"* message on the Billboard, most people had the opinion that the message was for the people living in a risk situation. They said the message was being communicated to such people like sex workers. The message they said was used to scare sex workers from risky behaviour. In other words, such billboards and murals were dividing the people between those who were seen by others as living risky lives, and those who

thought they were living safe lives. Awareness of the role of such messages in the lives of the entire community was one thing, but comprehension of the messages was certainly another aspect that drew our attention.

Comprehension

Understanding the messages on billboards and murals differed significantly among respondents. Using the "*AIDS is death"* metaphor we discussed with male students at Azania secondary school. Most students agreed that there were conflicting information about AIDS and people living with HIV. On one hand, it is emphasized that AIDS does not have a cure. That once one has it, it means he/she will eventually die. And because of this, people call the person living with AIDS *maiti anayetembea* (a walking corpse). The level of comprehension is low, and the messages on the billboard and murals give no room for elaboration. Almost the same understanding was seen among the general population. Thus, the majority in the community is not informed by such messages of the way to avoid stigma. Such messages leave the population to speculate.

Speculation over certain messages and graphics caught our attention on some billboards and murals. One billboard on the Northern zone has a photo of a man holding a woman. The words accompanying the photo say: "*kama kweli unampenda, utamlinda*" (if you truly love **her**, you will protect **her**)[i]. This billboard was projected together with another mural where a man is turning back from the camera facing the mirror. The man's face is not shown. What is seen is his back. Underneath there are words: "Men make a difference".



A billboard in Arusha city, Kijenge area (Northern zone).

Comparing the two messages, it is obvious that men are the targets. Here there were mixed understanding. Some said that such messages stigmatize women. Women, they said, 'are continuously being seen as if they cannot do anything.' It is only men who "can protect" women. It is only men who can make the difference. In other words, women keep on being seen as passive, while men are active.

Extending the discussion, one finds out that, to people living with HIV/AIDS, such messages increase extreme dislike of the other. It means those who got infected, were either not truly loved, or were not protected. This may be true in some circumstances but untrue in the other. Where the infection occurred through mother to child transmission, - MTCT, or blood transfusion for example, such messages make no sense.

Having unfamiliar culture seen through a language, or exaggerated image, which is not culturally appealing to the concerned community, was something that came in our discussion on the messages on billboard and murals. A mural with different images from the southern zone was projected to the respondents for discussion. One of the photos has children scavenging on the hip of waste products. Another photo in the middle shows a child holding a huge plastic "tube" attempting to fill it with air. There are words: "*Nimebahatika kupata puto*" (I am lucky, I have got a balloon). In the discussion, few students knew that they said "balloon" was nothing but an example of a condom. It was huge and exaggerated to the extent that it lost the meaning it intended to send across.



A mural in Iringa municipality, at the entrance of the town market (Southern Zone)

This photo and its backfiring message resemble the one we saw earlier on a man swinging on a piece of "cloth" which was not but an exaggerated condom. Swinging on a piece of cloths along the beach, or playing with balloons, is not something deeply rooted in Tanzanian culture. Using such pictorial images would need extra information to be able to make them meaningful. People need to have a cultural background to be able comprehend such messages.

Blaming others was an understanding that almost everyone talked about when discussing two murals. In Mwanza the recorded mural has a fisherman trying to seduce a woman by giving her fish. The man says: "*jioni tuonane pale bar*" (let us meet tonight at the bar), and the woman's answer is "*Aka babu! Nina pesa zangu, vijisamaki vyako visiniletee virusi*" (No,old man. I have my money, let not your fish brings virus to me). When asked about this mural, although there were mixed answers but almost all agreed that the woman has been empowered. Most people especially female students related risky behaviour with economic power. They said that if the woman had no money, she might have agreed to take the fish and meet this man in the evening, probably exchanging fish for sex. However, some said that the mural indicated that women blame men for bringing virus at home. The same group was shown another mural of a group of boys talking about a nice looking girl. One of the boys in the picture said: "*acheni tamaa, ninyi mnajua background yake*" (stop hankering after her, do you know her background?) meaning that she might be infected. After seeing this mural the group's conclusion was that blaming each other does not help in the fight to control AIDS, but were convinced that murals and billboards have a role in the campaign against AIDS.

Conviction

By showing that both sexes may infect each other, more than 70% were convinced that the campaign to stop the spread of AIDS must equally target all sexes .. The last mural to be discussed was of a man and a woman talking. The words say: "*wanawake na wanaume wana*

haki sawa katika maaumzi ya ngono salama" (women and men have equal rights in making decision concerning safer sex). All discussant liked this murals.

They were all convinced that billboards or murals and posters must have a positive message to be able to make an intended impact in the society. Some were actually afraid that if left the way they are now, some of the messages on the billboards or drawings in murals might make the efforts to control AIDS backfire. Some men in the entertainment clubs said that billboards should be abolished as they bring negative reactions.

Reactions

During the discussion, one man asked the researcher: "why does AIDS bring more scary and negative images than other incurable diseases"? The discussion moved for a moment from sex to tobacco. Another man joined the discussion: "Yes, everybody knows the lethal side effects of the tobacco in human body, we all know about cancer of the lungs. But the adverts all appear to be optimistic with life. Why is it not the same with AIDS? All advertisements are pessimistic.

Such reaction meant that the billboards and murals have impact in the society. What it has to be discussed however is how best communication can be improved to bring a positive behavioural change. Certainly, accusing or blaming people through the drawings or pictures cannot help in controlling the spread of the disease.

We should think of positive images that would draw much attention and yet pass the intended message. There are murals and billboards that have started this outlook.

CONCLUSION

From the findings and discussion above, we have seen that some communications on billboards and murals attempt to scare people from risk behaviours. The underlying assumption seems to be that way through using death imagery, individuals would be scared and hence stop or avoid riskybehaviours. This approach takes an individual to be the sole responsible for his/ her behaviour, and thus put emphasis on his/her decision making. However, following an activity model, a recent study (Onjefu Okidu, 2013) shows that the HIV/AIDS crisis should be analyzed taking into consideration the context of the individual. An individual does not exist alone. To be what one has become, there are several factors that need to be taken into consideration. To make a meaningful intervention in such socio-behaviour circumstances, one needs to take aboard a combination of factors. Certainly frightening images have not proved to be a successful methodology.

Billboard and murals are new avenues through which AIDS messages are communicated to people in Tanzania. Billboards are a new phenomenon that has brought with it some foreign culture. For example, public embracing between a girl and a boy is certainly a new phenomenon. Thus, the billboard which says: "*kama kweli unampenda, utamlinda*" (if you truly love her, you will protect her), not only brings in discussion on the relationship between love and protection, but also cultural issues on the value of love.

The argument raised in this paper is that billboards and murals should take into consideration the culture of the society in which they are erected. This position differs from what Bourgault says: "murals which present culturally challenging images or deliberately ambiguous icons stretch the interpretative powers of the viewer and engage him or her in a discourse about their meaning" (1999:2). It might be true that ambiguity could trigger discussion, but the question should be the end results. In the fight against AIDS uncertainties should be avoided. In Tanzania, uncertainties

surrounding HIV/AIDS were responsible for the wide spread of the virus in the early years of the pandemic in the 1980s (Mutembei A.K et al, 2002). Certainly the change that is expected would be hard to reach if societies do not get the intended message in a clear structured and un ambiguous language.

In some billboards, we have seen that there is a bilingual language of communication. Both English and Kiswahili are used, not as a translation of one from the other, but as two independent messages. This symbolizes a growing phenomenon of bilingual communication especially in cities. This however is in contrast from the Tanzanian experience of 70s up to mid 90s where Kiswahili language was the medium of communicating such messages. One could say therefore that the decline of the usage of Kiswahili language in such communication is an effect of globalization.

[i] Swahili language does not have gender specific prefixes, pronouns or suffixes. Thus the words do not say **him** or **her**. This translation came out of the discussion and interpretation done by respondents.

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