African Storytelling as A Pathway for Re-Imagining Strategic Communication in Faith-Based Contexts Using the SDGS

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Abstract

As the global community grapples with complex and interconnected challenges, the need for a culturally grounded and contextually relevant communication around sustainable development has never been more urgent. This paper explores the role of African storytelling traditions as a strategic communication tool for advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a focus on the faith-based contexts. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives and qualitative insights, the study examines how storytelling, rooted in African worldviews, communal values and theological imagination can be reimagines to communicate SDG-related themes such as peacebuilding, education, environmental stewardship and social justice. Central to tis exploration is the emergence of Afro-Faith Storytelling, a framework that integrates oral traditions, faith narratives and strategic communication to bridge the gap between grassroots realities and global frameworks. The study was guided by two running questions: (1) What is the role of indigenous faith-based narratives as legitimate vehicles for development discourse? And (2) How can storytelling serve as a culturally grounded and spiritually informed communication strategy for localizing the SDGs? By employing the use of semi-structured interviews with 14 African faith-based content creators, including podcasters, digital evangelists, musicians and TikTokers, the research identifies key themes that demonstrate how storytelling is not merely expressive but also transformational. This paper contributes to the fields of strategic communication and development studies by proposing the adoption of Afro-Faith Storytelling as both a communicative practice and an ideological framework that empowers faith communities to reclaim narrative agency, inspire ethical action and localize development goals in ways that honor African identity, memory and spirituality.

Keywords: African Storytelling, Afro-Faith Storytelling, Faith-based Communication, Strategic Communication, SDGs, Cultural Narratives, Development Discourse

Introduction

From a global development framework to a contextually contested communication process, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become both an aspiration and a challenge for many communities (United Nations, 2015). As the international community pushes forward on the SDG agenda, the disconnect between global frameworks and local realities continues to widen especially within the African context (Okigbo, 2020; CIVICUS, 2017). While the SDGs aim to address poverty, inequality, environmental degradation and peace, the manner in which these goals are communicated often fails to resonate with grassroots communities (Mkandawire, 2005).

Through time, development communication has been shaped by Western paradigms that prioritized data, infographics and institutional messaging (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013). Although these

models may be effective in certain contexts, they often fall short in societies where oral tradition, symbolic communication and spiritual interpretation dominate knowledge exchange. Across Africa, these communication paradigms overlook the deep cultural foundations of storytelling as a vehicle for meaning-making and social transformation.

More than an artistic expression, storytelling in Africa is a cultural institution (Mbai, 2025). Whether conveyed orally through proverbs, parables, music and rituals or through digital media like podcasts, storytelling functions as a medium of memory, instruction, resistance and change (Reitmaier, Bidwell, & Marsden, 2011; Izu, 2024; Abebe, 2021). These narratives shape behavior, sustain community values and preserve intergenerational wisdom and when embedded with theology and lived faith, they become an even more powerful communicative force.

Churches, Mosques and other faith-based institutions have long been among the most trusted and accessible communication networks across the continent that play a critical role in shaping public attitudes, moral frameworks and collective action (Makena & Mbai, 2025; Mhaka-Mutepfa & Maundeni, 2019). Despite their cultural and spiritual authority, these institutions remain underutilized in the strategic communication of global development goals especially the SDGs.

In recent years, the rise of digital storytelling tools like podcasting, which emulates African traditional oral storytelling forms, has been remarkable (Mbai, 2025); Reitmaier et al., 2011), yet there is still limited scholarship exploring how African faith-based storytelling traditions can be strategically reimagined as effective tools for development communication. There is a scarcity of literature that engages with the intersection of indigenous narratives, faith-based authority and strategic communication in Africa. This paper aims to contribute to closing this gap and explores the question: *What is the role of indigenous faith-based narratives as legitimate vehicles for development discourse?*

To ensure that a comprehensive and explorative insight is gained into this field, the study adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with 14 leading faith-based content creators from across Africa. These included podcasters, musicians, digital evangelists and community storytellers who integrate spiritual themes into their public communication. The interviews explored how storytelling is used to inspire action, mobilize values and localize the SDGs through platforms that reflect both traditional and digital modalities.

Drawing from this empirical lens, this study maps *Afro-Faith Storytelling* as an emerging ideological framework - that synthesizes African oral traditions, contextual theology and strategic communication into a culturally grounded response to global development messaging. Rather than treating storytelling as a mere technique, this framework positions faith-rooted narratives as transformative communication strategies capable of bridging the divide between grassroots realities and global policy discourse.

Literature Review

Storytelling is deeply rooted in African culture, serving as a primary means of knowledge transfer, culture preservation and social connection (Hautemo & Mushaandja, 2024). While the oral nature of African societies has often been framed as a challenge for development messaging, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), argues that storytelling is a moral and educational tool that transmits intergenerational values and resists cultural erasure. It presents a powerful opportunity for culturally resonant communication (Manyozo, 2017; Chun, 2019). African storytelling, expressed through proverbs, music, parables and rituals, is inherently dialogic, participatory and spiritually grounded, qualities that distinguish it from institutionalized Western communication paradigms. In recent years, digital storytelling formats such as podcasts have mirrored these oral traditions and offered a renewed platform for long-form engagement and community reflection (Abebe, 2021; Izu, 2024; Mbai, 2025).

Despite Mbiti's (1990) observation that religiosity in Africa is not compartmentalized but infused into all aspects of life including education and development, conflict resolution, justice and care for creation, faith-based storytelling has been underexplored in academic communication literature. Beyond pulpits of influence, this theological imagination is expressed in everyday narrative acts with their influence amplified by digital platforms (Abebe, 2021; Sigmon, 2023). Faith leaders are among the most trusted communicators on the continent yet their role in strategic development communication remain insufficiently studied (Mangeya, Mhute, & Jakaza, 2021; Lanfer, Rossmann, & Kargbo, 2023).

Developed in Euro-American contexts, mainstream strategic communication theory has historically prioritized instrumental messaging and institutional branding (Costa & Leandro, 2024; N'Diaye & Africa, 2009). These models often emphasize data visualization, campaign logic and linear messaging, elements that may not be clear in contexts where communal interpretation,

spiritual authority and narrative persuasion are more culturally appropriate (Okigbo, 2020; Mkandawire, 2005). While some communication for development frameworks attempt to acknowledge culture, few offer strategies that integrate spirituality as a foundational communicative logic (Makena & Mbai, 2025; Culture Action Europe, 2021).

Empirical studies show a persistent mismatch between how SGD themes are framed at the policy level and how communities interpret or respond to them at the local level. Civicus (2017) reports that local actors in Kenya and Nigeria perceive global development goals as abstract unless mediated through trusted voices and culturally embedded formats. Similarly, Pandian, Baboo, and Yi (2020) observe that youth and marginalized groups engage more with storytelling-based, emotionally relevant content than formal development briefs. These insights affirm the need for more context-specific models that link theology, culture and strategy, as supported by Osei-Tutu (2023) and Lowery et al. (2020).

Digital storytelling tools like podcasting have grown as modern conduits for African oral expression (Izu, 2024; Mbai, 2025). Their academic treatment however remains limited especially in faith-based development discourse. While platforms like Spotify and YouTube are home to rising African influencers and storytellers, scholarship has yet to catch up with how these digital voices shape public interpretation of SDG-related issues like peacebuilding, justice and environmental care.

This paper contributes to addressing these gaps by proposing Afro-Faith Storytelling as a theoretical framework grounded in African orality, contextual theology and strategic communication principles. It draws on insights from 14 semi-structures interviews with faith-based content creators whose work combines storytelling with spiritual reflection and advocacy. In doing so, the study adds to ongoing conversations in communication and development by reimagining storytelling as a legitimate ideological foundation for policy interpretation, behavior change and SDG localization in African contexts, and not just a medium.

Conceptual Framework for Afro-Faith Storytelling
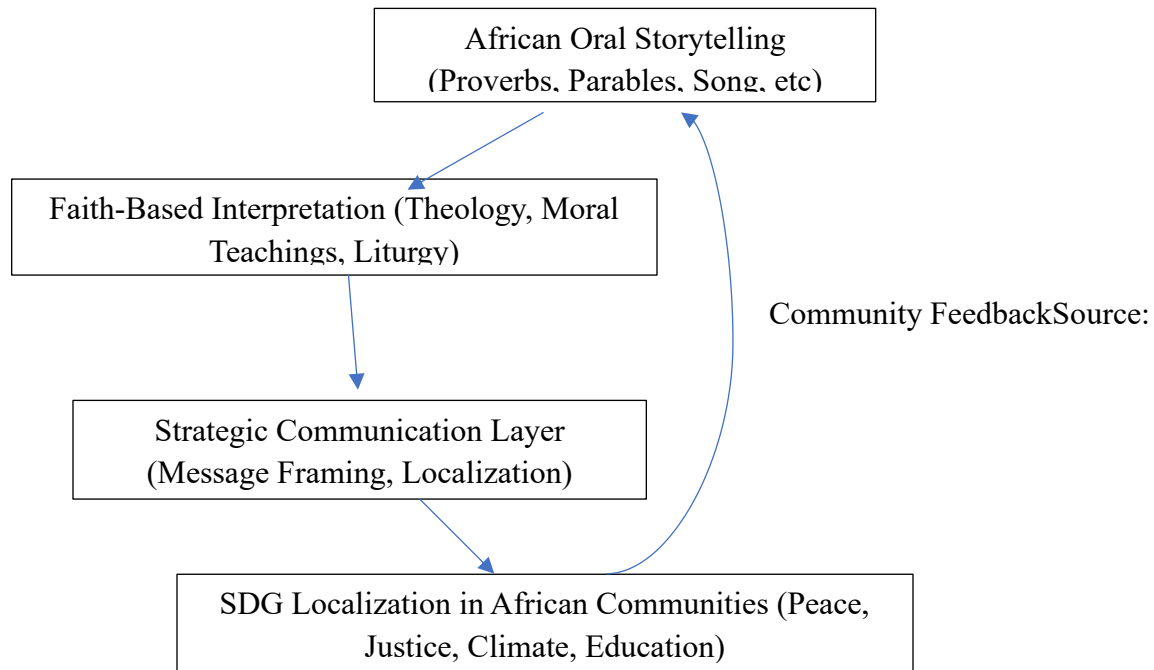
Researcher

This model illustrates how when mediated through faith-based interpretation, African oral storytelling is strategically adapted to localize SDG themes. It shows a communication process where traditional narratives and theological values are reframed to resonate with community realities. The feedback loop reflects how community engagement continuously reshapes the storytelling process.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how African storytelling traditions especially those within faith-based contexts can be strategically harnessed to communicate and localize the Sustainable Development Goals. The design was suitable for this study because of its ability to uncover deep, contextual insights into lived communication practices and narrative frameworks. The study consisted of 14 faith-based content creators from across Africa, selected through purposive sampling based on their active engagement in digital storytelling, podcasting,

music or faith-driven advocacy. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp audio between June and July 2025. The interviews sought to capture how these individuals integrate spiritual themes and communal values into their public messaging in relation to community development, sustainable peace and justice, education and environmental care. Interview questions focused on narrative formats, audience engagement and perceptions of the SDGs. The data was thematically analyzed and coded inductively. The key emergent patterns informed the development of the proposed Afro-Faith Storytelling framework. All participants provided informed consent through signed digital forms while anonymity and confidentiality ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. This approach allowed the study to generate solid and culturally resonant insights on how indigenous faith-based narratives serve as strategic tools for development communication in African contexts.

Results and Discussion

Faith shapes the Purpose of Storytelling

The study found that faith plays an active role in shaping the purpose of storytelling. Participants consistently emphasized that they believed their storytelling is not just a mere expression or an artistic one but one that is deeply grounded in their faith. Many saw storytelling as a form of ministry and a mean to fulfil their spiritual obligation with their narratives designed to educate, inspire and convict audiences. This is in line with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1986) assertion that storytelling functions as a moral intervention in the African context and not just content.

"Personally, every story I share is symbolic and must have a message. It's like a sermon for the digital generation, delivered outside the Church or pulpit. Even when I make jokes I include scripture in it because that is how our people understand with ease." Participant 4, Kenya.

This anchoring of storytelling in faith signifies both authority and urgency of some participants using terms like *the digital altar, virtual pulpit* and even *digital testimony* when describing their platforms. Their role in Afro-Faith storytelling reflects a fusion of prophetic communication and cultural memory which is aimed at shaping attitudes and inspiring behavior change. This aligns with Moyo (2023) who in his study of Christian faith formation among the Nsenga people argues

that culturally embedded theological practices are essential for shaping identity and ethical behavior within faith communities.

Storytelling as Moral Framing for SDG Themes

The findings also positioned storytelling as a moral framing for SDG themes with participants indicating that their storytelling intentionally reframed complex or abstract SDG concepts into the day-to-day realities of their audiences. Participants emphasized that instead of using technical language, they translate development goals into everyday realities using scripture, parables, hymns, rhetoric and proverbs. These storytelling strategies allow audiences to perceive SDG themes as spiritual mandates rather than as foreign agendas.

"Whenever I talk about climate change, people expect me to mention Europe or America but I don't quote policy or anything from the West. I say 'God gave us the garden, not a garbage bin.' This connects better because everyone wants a clean environment." Participant 9, Nigeria.

This approach reflects what Mkandawire (2005) and Odoom (2020) describe as value-based development communication where moral imagination and spiritual language are central to how people understand and engage with their social realities. It also supports the work of Abdulai et. Al. (2023) and Asuman et al. (2025) who argue that communication rooted in faith and culture resonates much more with the African urban youth and the rural communities more than messages designed for policy driven audiences.

"Today, the young generation wants to learn and bring out their culture. They want something that represents their home. Even those that consume what is Western they still customize it for the local context. It is home at the end of the day." Participant 6, Ghana.

The findings illustrated that when topics like gender justice, environmental stewardship or hunger are addressed in local languages and included into social livelihoods, they reflect the community's lived experiences and people have a larger tendency to spread the narrative. This reinforces the claim by Makena and Mbai (2025) that developmental narratives must begin with people's existing cultural narratives and vocabularies with an emphasis of the oral and symbolic traditions. This study goes further by asking how storytelling can help people move forward without disconnecting them from where they came from. Aro-Faith storytelling not only offers a communication method

but a cultural tool that bridges global aspirations like the SDGs with the spiritual and historical consciousness of African communities.

Unlike much of the literature that focuses on faith-based messaging or cultural content in isolation, this study emphasizes their intersection as a strategic ideological framework for development communication. This helps to address the critical gap: how do faith leaders facilitate development in a way that doesn't erase identity but strengthens it?

Digital Platforms as a Modern Fireside

A key insight that emerged from the study is the role that digital media like podcasting, Instagram reels, YouTube shorts and TikTok plays in extending the African tradition of fireside storytelling in the digital age. Participants described these platforms as vibrant "Virtual firesides" where community, reflection and shared values converge. This strengthens the claim that the digital shift has not replaced oral tradition but reconfigured it (Mugil, & Kenzie, 2025; Eguegu, 2022).

"I started my podcast with memories of how my grandmother sat with us narrating stories from her times. Only now, it's not just three kids, its over 3,000 people listening and commenting from different parts of the world." Participant 2, Malawi.

"During a short time, I have managed to build an audience across many parts of Africa. Some may say it is the fun or the production but I say it's because I tell the story of the people the way they experience it." Participant 11, Madagascar.

"Of cause it is special when you tell a story and someone you don't know reaches out or comments to say they can identify with that story or with a character in the story. It slaps different." Participant 3, Burundi.

This reimagination aligns with Reitmaier, Bidwell, and Marsden (2011) who emphasized that digital storytelling within the African communities often replicates traditional oral structures in tone, format and in their function. This study goes further to reckon that culturally adapted media becomes a space for participatory memory and narrative renewal.

"We don't just go into social media sharing live videos to entertain or teach. We tell stories and analyze and respond to comments. We use modern saying and African proverbs just like our elders

did. The digital space is like that traditional circle space for learning; it's not a lecture hall."
Participant 7, South Africa.

While scholars have emphasized the need to localize communication strategies (Okonkwo et al., 2023; Jonsson, & Bexell, 2021; Chilaule, 2023), this study brings to light a new dimension: the digital performance of orality as faith-based, strategic act of community-building and values transmission. In doing so, Afro-Faith Storytelling shifts from being grounded in African memory to being digitally mobile, spiritually alive and community-driven.

Tensions Between Global Messaging and Local Meaning

While participants revealed that they continuously explored dynamic ways to adapt SDG themes to local contexts, most expressed a deep uncertainty about the origins and assumptions behind these global frameworks. Some participants viewed the SDGs as a top-down agenda that despite being well-intentioned, it often failed to engage with African spirituality, cultural worldviews and community realities, creating tensions that storytellers struggle to negotiate.

"Some things we talk about in conferences like gender equality don't exist everywhere. Me if I go to Kayonza and start saying SDGs even teachers will wonder what I am talking about because we don't have these big words. But if I share a story about life there and in other places the people feel and see the difference and you just drop a Bible verse along the way because all that is about faith anyway." Participant 14, Rwanda.

These tensions reflect what White (2001) describes as the "cognitive dissonance" that occurs when development discourse is transplanted without contextual localization. Participants reported when stories don't align with their localities, they ended up feeling like they were translating language, values, meaning and priorities. This is because global campaigns often carry along the technical glossaries but lacked the African spiritual resonance and cultural humility and communality.

"Sometimes I wonder if we are supposed to set aside resources to change our people to fit the goals or to change the goals to speak to our people." Participant 12, Kenya.

This reflection provides a new dimension to Afro-Faith Storytelling. While empirical literature has highlighted the importance of cultural relevance in development communication, this study foregrounds the active struggle content creators face in reconciling the global community language

with the spirit of the local. Afro-Faith Storytelling is therefore not only a model for development communication but also a site of negotiation and resistance where African faith leaders reframe imported goals in ways that protect cultural dignity and reclaim narrative agency.

The findings of this study offer a compelling perception into how African faith-based content creators are reshaping the terrain of development communication through culturally grounded storytelling. Participants demonstrated an ongoing negotiation of identity, theology and strategic engagement resulting in the themes – faith as the purpose for storytelling, moral framing of SDGs, digital platforms as oral extensions and tensions between global language and local meaning. The strategy by the content creators to employ faith-based storytelling in curating their development-oriented messaging revealed that storytelling is not a passive act but a deliberate and value-driven process of localizing global goals. Collectively, the themes point to Afro-Faith Storytelling as more than a communication practice. It emerges as a distinct ideological framework that positions development as both a spiritual journey and an African cultural reclamation. The findings reveal that faith-rooted storytelling is not just effective in engaging with grassroots audiences but also crucial for restoring narrative agency in a development space that has been historically shaped by Western paradigms.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how African storytelling traditions, when reimagined within faith-based contexts, can serve as culturally resonant tools for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on insights from 14 content creators across the continent, the research highlights how storytelling which is deeply rooted in theology, oral tradition and cultural memory, offers more than an expressive medium. It underpins how storytelling provides a strategic, ethical and transformative approach to development communication.

By reframing development goals as matters of justice, memory and spirituality, Afro-Faith Storytelling empowers communicators to resist cultural erasure and inspire ethical action. This approach underscores the potential of integrating theological communication and culture as a transformative strategy for advancing the SDGs in Africa and beyond and in so doing addresses a significant gap in the literature by moving beyond isolated examinations of faith-based or indigenous communication and instead presenting their intersection as a coherent ideological framework.

If we are to localize global frameworks meaningfully, we must appreciate the cultural and narrative structures that are already active within local communities. Afro-Faith storytelling presents a unique opportunity to reimagine SDG communication not as dissemination but as dialogue that is rooted in identity, shaped by memory and carried forward in faith. This study offers a new theoretical lens raising important questions like: How can development agencies collaborate meaningfully with faith-based storytellers? What training or policy frameworks are needed to support culturally and spiritually grounded communication? Future research could examine how Afro-Faith Storytelling functions within different denominations or compare its impact across linguistic and regional contexts. Ultimately, this study advocates for a shift from exporting goals to cultivating meaning and from messaging to belonging.

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